It was on a summer’s day in Morris’ England when a romantic child, brought up in the Pre-Raphaelite tradition, leaned over the parapet of the old bridge at Sonning in the silver silence — the shimmering peace of early morning.

I had been taught to read out of *The Earthly Paradise* as one of many books with which my mother wanted to improve her acquaintance — and I had wept salt tears over the woes of the lady I persisted in calling ‘Little Physic.’ I knew all about Ogier the Dane, the Swan Maidens, Jason and his Fleece of Gold, Rhodopis (Morris never was able to explain why he called her Rhodope), and The Man born to be King, and always the background of the stories, whether it was in France or Greece or Iceland, or the Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon was, to my mind, very like this particular comfortable, straw-coloured, non-industrial bit of England that lay between Morris’ two homes. For, somewhere in the Thames Valley Morris had to dwell and he had not rested till he was able to row from one old manor house to another and live in them each by turn.

I pressed my chest against the edge of the parapet and looked down on the link between the two Kelmscotts, and watched the greenish, half translucent whorls of water moving round about and peaceably sucking away at the pillars fringed by their long hair of weeds, that upheld this low-arched, solid structure that exists no more. Troops of armed men as well as droves of sheep had once crossed it at the marching pace that is the bane of bridges. Somewhere on the bank, near-by, my father’s back was bent, painting it … I, lazy as the stream, stood and contemplated the undisturbed islets of chickweed interspersed with the busier parts of the flow — that portion of the Thames which was bent on making its way to Reading, some time, that day.… If I raised my head to get the blood out of it I could see the backwater to the north and the roof of the little French Horn — the other more
important Inn lay behind me. A very long way off, in the distance, was a soft grey haze which stood for the smoke of Reading. The drone of Miller Ited Witherington’s mill-wheel to the south filled the air pleasantly, like the burden of some archaic instrument supporting a timid country voice. The short, sharp but gentle taps of a reflective hammer falling upon not very obdurate metal came from the tanner’s yard next door to The White Hart, low, rose-embowered, with the reek of its kitchen chimney going up quite straight…. The sun brooded on the tiny bight bordered by green painted jetties where the covey of pleasure boats lay moored, ready for the use of visitors…. No one was likely to hire them yet—it was too early. The steam launches rarely appeared till noon, when the pleasure barge of Mr Vicat Cole, R.A. would hoot its approach and drive masterfully between the patient banks, undercutting them, jostling and lashing the sedges and muddying the loose-strife that sheltered under their eaves. Mr Cole would, perhaps, pick up my father and persuade him to go for a trip to Henley—a rueful accomplice, for the boat that carried him was a sinner, ruthlessly spoiling the ‘banks’ and, with them, the source of painter’s income.

Though people were busy all round me, here on the bridge, I could have heard a mouse cheep and I munched a bun from the village shop and considered…. ‘The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts.’…

And suddenly—quite suddenly—the suave stillness that slightly masked the omnipresent groundswell of man’s activities was dispelled by sharp noises—the click of voices, like brittle glass, shivered on the silence and the plash of oars contained in the sullen, stone-walled archway below…. Then the voices turned to thin, social cackle as a couple of boats shot out from beneath and the rowers widened the scope of their oars….

I recognised the occupants of the first boat that waited a little as the other negotiated the archway. In a flash I realised that they were the right people to be rowing in this bit of purely medieval England. Standing up and shouting indecorously worded advice to the other boat was the man who loved a battle shout better than a symphony, the Defender of Guinevere (*sic*) and of Gudrun, straddling, legs apart in the boat as erstwhile waggishly depicted by his pals on the ceiling of the Oxford Union, the Viking in the blue byrnie, the maker of my mother’s
dining-room table; now, in the afternoon of his life, self-styled, 'the idle singer of an empty day', the Hector of Hammersmith and Varangian Guard of his own Metropolitan District – William Morris.

But William Morris was not idle, though Bolshevism was not yet about, and the day, though pleasure-loving and anti-socialistic, was not empty. As in London streets, in his garden at Hammersmith and, earlier, in his shop in Queen Square, he wore blue, very blue, serge. He had attended to the procuring of that shade himself – I have seen him come up with his arms blue to the elbow, fresh from the vat. His golden beard showed up against the lapis lazuli of his attire and my inner, romantic eye saw him as a helmeted Viking, leaning on his lance. . . .

Behind him, sitting up very stiffly, as a weary queen on her dais of Turkey-red cushions, was the historic Janey – 'Pandora' – 'Proserpina' – 'Aurea Catena' – 'Astarte Syriaca', and 'La Pia' of the Purgatorio – gaunt, pale, ashen-coloured hair and all. 'Scarecrow', as she called herself but still a 'Stunner', to use the Pre-Raphaelite term of praise, she looked just then, in the morning glare, very like the forlorn wife of Nello Di Pietro, the lady undone by the miasma of the marshes:

Siena mi se, Maremma mi disfecemi.

The next boat was propelled by Morris’ daughter and the daughter of another of the beautiful women who posed for the lucky D. G. Rossetti, Marie Stillman, and grateful for her aid were William De Morgan and Morris’ friend of Birmingham days, ‘Crom’ Price. But Jenny, alas, her father’s favourite, was not there. I had been at school with the two daughters. Jenny Alice, the eldest, was tall, stoutish, hefty, with brown hair done in a way we should call ‘bobbed’ nowadays, very like her father and with his hasty mode of talking, as if she wanted to say her say and have done with it. I asked her once, over our desk at school, very seriously, which of her father’s poems she preferred and, after a ruminative pause and while the class mistress’s eye was off her, she announced clearly that it was Sir Peter Harpdon’s End – and no mistake!

Her younger sister, Mary, was simply, to my eyes, the most beautiful creature I ever saw, cold and unkind to me who adored her from afar and watched her sailing in and out of the ugly pitch-pine desks that filled our ugly pitch-pine schoolroom, looking like the Lady Alice De La Barde or Yolande of the Five Towers. She had her mother’s famous night-coloured hair but
her mouth held no suggestion, even then, of her mother’s noble and fulsome curve. Jenny asked me, as school-girls will, to go to tea with her and her family at Horrenden House and, rapt, holding my breath with awe, I had tea with her and her father and mother. I can never forget Mrs Morris sitting still, silent, and withdrawn, on the high-backed settle with the painted bend-over roof. Beauty such as hers need not palter with small talk—I cannot remember any word from her lips that day except, ‘There’s your milk, Jenny!’ as she pushed a cup towards her eldest daughter. I believe that she was diffident...proudly conscious of a want of mere booklearning...but, like Joan of Arc, who maintained in her trial that, where her needle was concerned, she feared neither maid nor wife of Rouen, Mrs Morris was famous for her embroidery, and sitting ‘lily-like, arow’, with Red Lion Mary and Mrs W(ardle), who was really Madeline Smith, laid, with her needle, the foundations of the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co.

The man (William de Morgan) who was propelling the boat, looked older than William Morris, the hair on his bare, dome-like head was spare, wiry and grey. He was an old friend of mine and of my sisters. I did not, at that time, connect his name with literature. He was just a pleasant, if erratic, dance partner, perfunctorily apologetic about his age but reckoning little of its incidence on his Ball programme and, in his moments perdues, turning out pots of wonderful sheen and lustre at a loss. (Several pages on de Morgan have been omitted here—Editor.)

I hailed them timidly. With smiles and salutations and the morning in their upturned eyes they passed out of my sight along the reedy waterway. Romance—for me, then, there was no other form of it—had brushed by me like the wing of a swallow and ‘I felt chilly and grown old.’ Sonning, that had been well enough, was left empty and desolate. I threw away my unfinished bun and sought the landlady of The White Hart. Yes, Mr Morris and party had lain in her house last night, they had rowed by easy stages from Kelmscott, Hammersmith, and were bound for Kelmscott, Lechlade. Everybody in the village knew the order

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1 Presumably Horrington House, Turnham Green.

2 Madeline Smith had been charged in Scotland with the murder of her father and released on a verdict of non-proven. Later she married George Wardle who was for many years Manager of Morris and Co.
of their coming and going; ‘Topsy’ always addressed even the smallest audience as if he were tub-thumping in a crowd. At supper, the night before, he had doubled up a table-knife in the excitement of an argument with ‘the other gentleman’, and had paid for it. Afterwards, Morris told me that he had had a jolly good row with ‘Crom’ as to the existence or no of Mrs Harris. Sonning, he added, was a ‘pretty crib’.

Well, I could have quoted pages, at that moment, from the Defence and had even written a play about Guendolen, whose Knight pulled himself up by her hair to the tower wherein she was immured by the witch Rapunzel, but I admit that, as I grew adolescent, I began to find ‘Topsy’ less picturesque than rude and outrageous. Once, after a truly good lunch at Kelmscott House, from whose four, deep-bayed, wide windows we had surveyed the Boat Race, he met us all trooping out of the dining-room and greeted us severally with:

‘Well, are you full?’

I think he meant to imply that there were others upstairs waiting to come down but—he was a poet! Answering simply, ‘Yes, thank you!’ I passed out into the garden with Mr Rennell Rodd. I was not, as it happened, so very full; I was too much excited by my surroundings to eat, and then, most of the time, Mr Rennell Rodd had been reading me letters from his great friend Oscar (Wilde) in America… ‘I feel like a young conqueror’… and showing me a copy of his own poems which that friend had had brought out there—a delicate, flimsy thing, like a branch of new appleblossom, the verses printed on alternate leaves of green and rose.

Later in the day I was again upset by Mr Morris’ brutal explicitness, but it was my own fault this time. The young men and maidens played Prisoner’s Base. I, uninterested in the silly game, managed to break the rules that I had not troubled to understand, and kept running out of ‘prison’ only to be conveyed back to it by one or other of the young knights who abounded, as was fitting, here in Joyous Gard.

Seizing me firmly by the arm and putting me into durance again Mr Morris cured me of that. He announced, in a voice like that of a captain speaking through a trumpet;

‘I think Miss Hunt breaks “prison” because she likes to have a young man take her back again!’

My delicate maiden susceptibilities were outraged by his sometimes plain speaking, his general inarticulateness rebuffed and
repelled me, his plunge into socialism finished me. To see him standing, precariously posed, on a tub in Hammersmith Broadway, gesticulating lamely, hoarse with vituperation, not even, it would seem, 'getting' them, I forgot that this was the man who wrote Guendolen. But, this year, 1923, when I see those queer chairs in the Tate Gallery, like 'incubi and succubi', as Rossetti said, and observe the drift of yellow hair all down the back of one of them—lady in hennin above, knight in casque below—I forgive him the fork-twistings, the tub-thumpings, that short luncheon address and the stern monition 'to play the game'. I realise that Morris was, even then, just allowing himself the blunt speech of a Knight of Arthur's Court, or Captain of Edward the Black Prince. His England was not much bigger than the little, old, pretty England of theirs, where the knightly game of rounders, in coloured surcoats and with deadly lances was being played with ladies like Guendolen or Clarice for prizes instead of Maggie Cobden or me on the lawn at Hammersmith.

Morris' world was the only world for an aristocrat, a churchman and 'a millionaire,' as his friends would have it, at four hundred a year; a world where, like wood and water, pains and pleasures were pretty equally distributed, except to serfs and slaves; a world where even killing was no murder but a tribute to the charms of your lady, and God smiled on you when you did it neatly;

Swerve to the left, Son Roger, he said,
    When you catch his eye through the helmet slit,
Swerve to the left, then out at his head—
    And the Lord God give you joy of it!

'Top' or 'Topsy' (after the little candid nigger girl in Uncle Tom's Cabin) was surely a mystic, a man born East of the Sun and West of the Moon, a changeling, full of passionate, confused remembrances of the place, the age, the people he came from. A thick-set, strong-looking boy with a high colour and, like all changelings, 'a fearful temper', he must have been brought from Avalon or Caerleon into Victorian England; his mute endeavour to form an environment suitable to himself was the tragedy of his life and the fount of his eminence. He was always, as he said, 'a lover of the sad lowland country', and the décor of his first home in the breathless stillness of the Lea marshes formed part, ever after, of his essential mind-furniture—a room, 'hung with
faded greenery', in Queen Elizabeth's Lodge at Chingford Hatch – the moat round his father's low house, full of pike and perch and, in the middle, an island on which there were ancient hawthorn, hollies and chestnut... The Oxford of his day was walled, surrounded by buttercup meadows, like the town of St Omer where Clarice lay. His very medieval Helen looks down from the battlement and sees the pike moving under the plots of water-lilies in the moat round Troy. 'The beauty of all created things' (mark you, he does not say, of men and women!) 'lay heavy on him', at twenty-two; 'the balance between joy and sadness, both contending' made him 'womanish'. Stooping, he gathered marigolds, till the blood wandered to his head... Stronger and stronger the 'memories of past days' came, till he walked on trembling, his wet hand and falling flowers marking the ground as he went. Poor Changeling!...

And ever so through life he moved, 'going on always in that strange land that to me is more than real,' his work, as he said himself, 'an embodiment of dreams in one form or another', husbanding his great strength for nothing except the gusts of misdirected violence that was so fatal to chairs and table-forks, letting the girls pull themselves up to his shoulder by his strong hair that I have seen his majestic wife, in a moment of abandon, tie up with blue ribbons....

Inarticulate: he was self-conscious; manly: he was ashamed of the turgid dreams, the clotted morasses of memory in which his power stood rooted, for, I think, had he not chosen this medieval 'lay' and possessed such a power of projection into an environment propitious to his genius, his share in the Movement would have been negative. But as it was, he was needed, for Holman Hunt was slightly stolid and Rossetti, at that time, a would-be man of the world. But Morris was ashamed of his qualities, was apt to make fiery holocausts of the outpourings of his sick adolescence, and used to beat himself over the head to take it out of himself and make him more like the Heir of Redclyffe.

And, all the while, alongside this burly life-stream of his, lay the morbid backwaters, the stagnant pools of Walthamstow, and the only woman he ever loved was more like night than day, with 'cheeks hollowed a little mournfully' and shadowed by dark hair, crêpelée, like the wood's twisted undergrowth, wreathed and stooping over a secret stream. Before he met her he described 'Mabel' (not Amabel) with her 'heavy, rolling, purple hair, like a queen's crown above her white temples, with
her great slumbrously passionate eyes and her full lips under­neath...

'Top can write poetry!' shrieked Rossetti, older, for he was twenty-nine, to the callow Oxford youths who mustered at the Pembroke evenings to hear Topsy, with entire absence of self­consciousness, read aloud Praise of his pre-ordained lady. Schoolboy fashion, he disclaimed inspiration; 'Do you call that

poetry? I could do three a day quite easily!' For these passionate jingles were, surely, projections of the effortless Memory of the Cell that abides from Eternity onwards and knows not Then or Now? Or call them coloured spirit messages flung on the white table of his simplicity. Or take a simile from the singer's own trade; painted cloths—warp of remembrance, woof of passion? *The Sailing of the Sword, The Blue Closet, Two Red Roses across the Moon*, with its haunting, senseless refrain—what sense do you expect from any form of mediumistic communication?—are but flying wraiths of *chose vues*, dredgings from Freudian depths; they are blurred, striated, as if seen in a crystal ball poised on the dark gloom of a nun's lap. Quite clever persons have composed, in their sleep, verses that they are able to recapture next day; and *Yolande of the Five Towers* is as satisfactory a haul of memory as *Kubla Khan*.

What is *The Wind*, that jumble of bloody and grotesque incidents, but a garbled account of some Big New Tragedy of an earlier time! An unsuspected homicidal maniac, per chance stimulated to murder his mistress by the colour of a daffodil field, complementary to that of blood? ... and, again, stimulated to remembrance by the orange that rolls out from under the chair in which the fighting men have placed the paralytic while they go to the war—what war! Yes; colour in washes, primary, deep and slab, is laid over all Morris' poetical surfaces. Yellow is the dominant in an early poem, burned and lost, *The Dying Blanche*, who speaks her Pietist farewell lying under the mystic moonbeam that invests all with its sickly pallor...

Broad leaves that he does not know ... and hemlock that he does not know ... upon the ground in the spring woods, the autumn sound of the dead leaves and a mystical, yellow flower growing under the birch trees... He lies asleep under the glare of the full moon (known by the ancients to provoke accesses of madness) and then another coloured gleam, of a white dress, shoots by him, passes the aspen tree, comes to him and kneels and prays that she 'may be forgiven—' For what? 'O, the dream
right dreary is!' For his lost love moans and the sleepy, startled birds hear... He lifts up her head and says to her softly that they twain will soon be dead and they must pray that it may be soon so that, in Heaven, among the angels, they may kiss. 'Yea,' she says, 'but kiss me now, Ere my sinning spirit goes... Unto the place where no man knows.' When he kisses her she dies and lies quite still among the flowers. What eldritch fate had parted her from and forced her to sue to her lover for pardon?

When Morris was a boy the railway only ran as far as Reading. As he grew up, the suitable environment depended more and more on memory, for Oxford grew less and less like St Omer and when her churches were given over to Gilbert Scott for ruin and renovation he felt it keenly. The Foreword to The Earthly Paradise reads like an advertisement of a Lunn Tour:

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke...

he may have been driven to practise some necessary inhibitions of thought. Since I read Dr Hoch's book I have wondered if the-to-me-strangely inexpressive countenance of William Morris did not betoken some such subtle form of voluntary withdrawal from unfavourable, even inimical, environment, whether the strayed medievalist had not at some period invited the Benign Stupor that stays the would-be eremite, maddened by the dreadful pomp and circumstance of civilisation from seeking a suicidal seclusion?

There was, perhaps, a more personal reason for his inhibition of all emotion. There came into his life the overwhelming prepotence of Rossetti whose 'powerful personality' swayed everyone into its orbit, damning, blinding and paralysing. Rossetti commanded from his friend surprising and medieval renunciations and the boy made his surrender in full consciousness of where it might lead him, in art at all events. Boldly he said, when accused of subordinating his style to this Frankenstein monster and, thereby, losing his own originality: 'Yes, I've got beyond that desire for self-expression. I want to imitate Gabriel as much as I can!' The eternal schoolboy Morris was, and his habit of doing nothing by halves! 'Of all men I ever heard I have the strongest will for good and evil. I could soon find out whether

3 Dr T. G. Hake is probably intended.
a thing were possible or not for me: then, if it were not, I
threw it away for ever, never thought of it again, no regrets, no
longing for that, it was past and over to me; but, if it were pos­
sible and I made up my mind to do it, then and there I began
it, turning neither to the right hand nor to the left hand till
it was done. So I did with all things I set my hand to. Love
only, and the wild, restless passions that went with it, were too
strong for me, and they bent my strong will so that people think
me now a weak man, with no end to make for in the purposeless
wanderings of my life....

Oh, Mabel, if you only could have loved me...

He renounced as violently and explosively as he did every­
thing else and, after the final extinction in 1868 of Rossetti’s
influence, he surrendered his personal life anew to the principle
of Communism and spoke at Hammersmith for the cause in the
husky shout of rowing days at Oxford, with a Berserk fury that
foreran the study of the Volsunga Saga and other Northern
models. I have heard him. He then rushed off to Iceland to see
the donnée of Brynhild’s Hell Ride and of the Laxdœla Saga
and Gudrun and her lovers—’I did the worst to him I loved the
most’, was all she ever would say—and so it came to be said of
the demoniacally possessed Rossetti who spared no one in his
universal pride of domination of man and woman. The fevered
multiple portraits of one model tell the tale of his self-will and
self-indulgence to those who know.

Among the ice-packs of Sulitelma and on the back of pony
Mouse the lonely, unloved poet found solace and such change
of actual environment as was needed to carry him to the end of
his empty day. A dead man, full of sound and fury still, posing
as a lourdau who did not feel—and, perhaps, he didn’t, I hope
not, yet none ever could find a better reason for his early death
except a broken heart.

The influence of Rossetti violently, in thought, banished, while
suaviter in modo tapered off—they were co-housemates at
Kelmscott for two or three years after the fateful year of the
tent in the Cheyne Walk garden—he spent all his capacity for
friendship on the one who had shared with him the dangerous
cult of the Italian voluptuary, the man who, though he took a
baronetcy, never dared mention it and, though he painted The
Golden Stairs in greys and browns, had seen with him the blue
and gold dragonfly on the shallows of the Thames at Oxford
and took with its glint the sudden and complete revelation of
the might of colour; who, with him, standing on his nail-pierced foot in the carpet slipper, which was all he had brought to foot the dusty Norman roads in, had received the chrism of that wonderful Sunday morning's Mass in the cathedral at Beauvais. Both the young clergymen-elect bowed themselves to Art that day.

The gentle Ned had, perhaps, something to get over; the banning of music at The Grange whenever Top came; the coarsish food talk; the rumbustiousness and all. Yet, "The things that in thought are most dear and necessary to me are dear and necessary to no one except Morris only", was Ned's moan when Top died.

Colour, and again colour, and always colour—colour, pagan or religious, holy or bloody, but always fervid and splendid, whether seen on the bright sleeves of Guenevere that 'Launcelot dared not come within a yard of' or the red foam and spatter of blood on Norsemen's shields. I should say that, at the end of his life, he saw, as Guendolen saw, 'high up in the dustiness of the apse', the glory and the gold, and dying, felt that he had cause to say, 'I have had a beautiful life and I am glad of it'. Can't one hear the eternal schoolboy that he was, saying, as the schoolbox is hoisted on the fly; 'It's the end of the "hols" and I have had a topping time!'

EDITOR'S NOTE. Lady Mander writes: 'I put this article together from three typewritten versions which I found among Violet Hunt's papers before they were handed over to Newnham College, Cambridge under the terms of her Will. Mr R. C. H. Briggs located a published version in The London Mercury, January 1955; it is reprinted here with some additions from the typescripts, reproduced by kind permission of Cornell University which recently acquired the papers from Newnham College. One passage, however, could not be fitted in and is therefore given here separately. It occurred in what appears to be the earliest draft and after the paragraph on Morris reproaching Violet for "breaking prison" (p. 10).'

A deep, simple, unsophisticated nature sealed, I think, to all but Ned Jones. B-J. broke his heart, nearly, on the morning 'Topsy' died and came no more to Sunday breakfasts. 'The things that are in thought to me most dear and necessary, are dear and necessary to no one now, except Morris only.' It was very touching. For William Morris was not of the empty day which bored him, nor did he desire to be, but lived, as it has always seemed to me, in a state of wilful mental abeyance from some antagonistic passions and modern ideas, I forgave him the luncheon speech.
His mental reservation did not in any way preclude his facing of the burdens of our common humanity, and enjoying them in such innocently Rabelaisian fashion. He just allowed himself the plain, blunt speech of a knight of Arthur’s Court or a Captain of the Black Prince— for his England was surely the little, pretty England with its London, small and white and clean, and its shining Thames-side wharves, hardly crowded with bales and hogs-heads and jars of wine, while:

... Geoffrey Chaucer’s pen

Moved over bills of lading... 

And William Morris, like his master, and the troubadours and minnesingers, from whom he inherited, divorced, in his rhyme at least, knightly love from sexuality, and, in life, the manifestations of the spirit from those of the body. In his case and that of one other, I am tempted to believe in the doctrine of the transmigration of souls: he was never all there, that is to say, with both feet in the same century, but continually moving in thought between them, trailing clouds of memory from one to the other. There is a novelist of whom it has been said that, when he is writing of medieval times, he merely writes down what he has actually seen and remembers, like the ex-galley slave in Kipling’s story.

Certainly in reading Morris or Hueffer (Ford Madox Ford), we find ourselves transferred back with the utmost sangfroid and convincingly to a world where, like wood and water, pleasures and pains, comfort and risks, are almost equally apportioned, where fat beeves move complacently over white roads or are hurried into the safety of little walled towns, outside whose limits wild beasts and armed marauders rove, where knights are sometimes bold and ladies always in distress. I fancy the buttercup meadows of Walthamstow represented for Morris... (etc.)