June–July 1925. Somerville College, Oxford: end of Midsummer Term after Finals. Going-down interview with Miss Emily Penrose, Principal. As is her way, she puts me face to the light of the big window while she is at her desk in a dimmer corner: shrewd eyes, white hair, questioning and scrutinising, terrifying but tolerant. ‘And what reading have you most enjoyed?’ ‘Chaucer and William Morris.’ ‘William Morris? How extraordinary!’ It seems that Miss May Morris has written from Kelmscott wanting a village schoolmistress. Would I be interested? Like to think about it? Go for an interview? (Visions of a many gabled old house; visions of happy children doing poetry and craftsman’s work in the Land of Nowhere!) I would. She will arrange it. Smiles, delight, farewells.

Spanner then neatly thrown into the works by my tutor C.R. Young, a shrewd, realistic and downright Scot. (I have to thank her for punishing me for, and I hope curing of, purple passages and dim meanderings.) ‘You will not take such a job. Inferior status and salary. Elementary school or worse. If you want to be a teacher you must take a training year instead. You are a specialist. All the same, you will go for the interview as it has been arranged. Interesting!’ Somewhat crushed and down-to-earth, I’m still going. I receive a telegram from May Morris addressed to ‘Somerville Cottage, Oxford’. Train times to Lechlade Station, where I shall be met.

July 9th, my birthday. Having carefully ironed my green linen jerkin (stencilled round the hem, save the mark, with yellow crocuses!), brown skirt of Irish homespun, shoes worn out but tremendously polished (all this in honour of the Arts and Crafts Movement, to which I had been introduced at school by my English mistress), I set off mid-morning for Oxford railway station with my friend Betry Freeth (who intends to remain invisible at Lechlade but will wait for me at Fairford till afternoon). On the way she buys me at Blackwells a red-covered book, ‘The Wood Beyond the World’. It is before me now; on the flyleaf: ‘Margaret Thomson, on the day that Mary Lobb rattled her off to
Entrance to Kelmscott Manor—'I am through the latched door in the stone wall and walking up a flagged path.' Drawing by C.M. Gere in Aymer Vallance's 'William Morris: his Art, his Writings, and his Public Life': Bell, 1897.

Kelmscott in a dog-cart.' An almost empty local train, pottering through enchanted country, Yarnton, Eynsham, South Leigh, Lechlade. My friend vanishes off to Fairford. Outside the station the dog-cart indeed, brown-painted, polished and smart, brown pony small and plump (Icelandic in style at least?) and Mary Lobb herself. I don't think there were the famous plusfours but there indeed was the burly figure, the mannish brown tweeds, the Tyrolean hat, the red cheeks and loud voice of legend. 'Jump up! I'm Mary Lobb.' We rattle off westwards, into the breeze. The noon sun shines on us from the wide blue sky. There
are wide fields covered with corn, scattered with red poppies (I remember or imagine a scent of bean fields).  

Mary Lobb points out landmarks with her whip, discoursing amiably. She came from the West Country as a landgirl during the War and never wanted to leave. She loves ponies, the land, the life. I catch aslant her shining eyes, red cheeks, enthusiasm. Nevertheless, guilt troubles me. False pretences! Teacher training!  

We have arrived. I 'recognise' over the hedge and under the elms, those often read of, even dreamt of, golden-grey gables, the roof tiles 'in their orderly beauty as a fishes scales or a bird’s feathers.’ 'Out you get!' Mary Lobb has disappeared. I don’t remember seeing her again. I am through the latched door in the stone wall and walking up a flagged path. There is a scent of roses from standard trees on either hand, a scent surely of box and lavender. I recognise it all from descriptions and illustrations in Mackail. The front door is open. May Morris.  

I knew, I suppose, that William had been dead twenty nine years, Janey eleven. I don’t think I knew much about Jenny Morris, certainly nothing of Halliday Sparling. May was at that time sixty three. I had thought she was some sort of spinster living alone on her inheritance and certainly she looked remote and withdrawn enough. I expected flowing draperies but she was dressed conventionally for the occasion in a dark 'costume' with a frill of white. She was tall, slim, upright, pale face strikingly oval, greying hair smooth, eyes calm and kind. There was a feeling of very gentle hospitality long practised. She led me along a flagged passage to a washroom, where, she said, ‘You will find powder and everything you need.’ (Powder seemed to me at that time the height of sophistication.) In the washroom I looked at my undistinguished features framed for the first time in what seemed a silver mirror of Florentine work. My guilt returned. Perhaps I should not be there.  

In the dining room I am presented to the Vicar, a stout middle aged gentleman, clerical black and a dog-collar, gold watch chain displayed over a good deal of front. We eat at a long refectory table. The vicar is rubicond and happy, loves to talk, loves food. We eat fish nicely cooked in a white sauce (was it a Friday?) Whether it was gudgeon from the river or fish from the fishmonger I know not. I am exceedingly taken up with the loveliness of the surroundings and find it difficult not to stare and remain silent. Hand-spun embroidered linen, engraved glass, painted plates, wrought silver spoons heavy with ornament—surely some of the ‘best things’ brought out for a visitor, however humble. Furniture and hangings, ‘but little, and of the simplest forms’. Do I remember or may I have imagined head-height light-coloured tapestry with a pattern of stags and trees? The talk is between the Vicar and Miss
May Morris on her pony Laura, from a photograph taken a few years after Margaret Horton’s visit.

Morris—of parish matters, and then of me. He says, ‘Well young lady, have you got your certificate?’ I think this the height of ignorance in relation to my BA Honours Oxon, and I reply rather stiffly that I hope to, then it occurs to me that I am here on false pretences, but I am unable to explain just then.

Two o’clock having come I am to go with the Vicar to see the school, a Victorian ark-shaped building across the green and beyond the church. I knew little then about class divisions but the shock of contrast with the gracious living at the Manor (though Lords of the Manor they never were, and made every effort to bridge the gap) was considerable. The rooms seemed large and dull, the classes small—two rows of silent children lined up and staring at the Vicar, who seemed accustomed to visiting there and talked all the time at the pale silent teacher. I would have liked the chance to ask her if she liked teaching there. I don’t think she did. They had been learning the Journeys of St. Paul; there were addition and subtraction sums on the blackboard and maps of the Empire on the walls, no drawings, no flowers. A Church School with
basic aims and a coldness to chill one. I knew I was no good at
arithmetic and I had bad memories of the Journeys of Paul.

Back in the drawing room of the Manor (the Vicar having vanished)
I’m sitting opposite Miss Morris. Confession seems inevitable. ‘Miss
Morris, I’m really here on false pretences . . .’ She is listening most
attentively, even smiling. Out it comes, the specialisation, the teacher-
training. Still smiling; she understands completely. ‘So the whole thing
has been a rather happy mistake.’ Now would I like to see over the
house?

I now feel quite at home as, pleasantly talking, she leads me upstairs,
downstairs, through the simple, carefully tended rooms. There is a sense
of space and peace, few but choice furnishings, a carved chest, a
rush-seated chair from Morris and Co., a Persian carpet. There are
strange, evocative objects, bringing one up sharply, heard of but hardly
believed, like things from Tutankhamen’s tomb: Morris’s Elizabethan
four-poster, with its embroidered legend (forty weeks to embroider)
‘The wind’s on the wold – And the night is a-cold – And Thames runs
chill . . .’ (and cold it must have been in that ‘passage room’, ‘covers and
hangings much needed . . .’). In the Tapestry Room so much associated
with Rossetti, the tall Samson figures, ‘the indigo blues, the greys and
warm yellow browns’, more faded and ancient than ever; in the garden
room, a round table of English oak, typical Morris and Co., simple,
solid, almost immovable. In this room there is a hand loom with a
tapestry just begun. May Morris gets up early to work, as her father did.
The hand-dyed, hand-spun wools are bright reds, blues, greens,
yellows; flowers are growing in ever-fresh invention out of the grass,
into the air, a beginning as vital as spring. This I like best of all. The
house with its treasures and memories is being lovingly preserved but
better still the work and tradition is seen in action. In this room, Miss
Morris takes down from the wall two pastel drawings of herself and her
sister. ‘These are by Rossetti.’ I feel her pride. In spite of everything that
happened it is clear that as a child she loved Rossetti.

As I’m going I’m offered the shillings for my fare to Lechlade. Though
poor I’m happy to be able to refuse, and to return thanks for a
memorable day as to a kind friend. She puts a big bunch of roses in my
hand. ‘From my father’s garden.’ As I go on to Fairford through dusty
lanes feathered with July flowers, herb robert, stitchwort, cow parsley
and campion, I think something like this: ‘There goes a kind and quiet
woman, simple and intelligent, who has known trouble and turning
points and is not too busy or important to talk and listen to a very young
student and to set her worried mind at rest.’

A few days afterwards Miss Penrose received and passed on to me a
note saying among other kind things that Miss Morris would have liked Miss T. for the teaching post, but that Miss T. had decided for further training on the advice of her tutor. This indeed I did. I treasured this note for many years until the mice ate it in Brunswick Square.

NOTES


2 W.M. to Georgie 44 years before: ‘The country is one big nose-gay, the scents wonderful; the life of us holiday-makers luxurious to the extent of making one feel wicked, at least in the sense of bewitched.’ W.M. to G.B.J., Midsummer Day, 1889. Henderson, ‘Letters’ p. 315.

3 ‘The roses were rolling over one another with that delicious super­abundance of small, well-tended gardens which at first sight takes away all thought from the beholder save that of beauty.’ ‘News from Nowhere’, standard ed. p. 226.

4 Morris to Emery Walker 43 years before (August 1888) ‘Look under the mat and you will find the house-key. Enter and be happy.’ W.M. to E.W., 26 August 1888. Henderson ‘Letters’ p. 297.

5 Rossetti: ‘Not the liveliest of company.’ ‘The questions why a Philistine leader should have a panther’s tail, or Delilah a spike sticking out of her head, or what Samson, standing on a heap of slain, has done with the ass’s jawbone, will obtrude themselves at times between more abstract speculations.’ D.G.R. to W.B.S., 13 August 1871: ‘Collected Letters’, vol. III p. 978.