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Chapter nine: The parting of the ways.

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CHAPTER NINE: THE PARTING OF THE WAYS.

THOSE persons who had been in the habit of complaining that they found the subjects of William Morris's pen—his "Guenevere," "Jason," "Earthly Paradise," "Love is Enough," and "Sigurd," his translations of the *Æneid* and Norse Sagas, of merely literary and archæological interest; too much belonging to an unreal land of dreams and legend; or, if not mythological, at any rate too far away in scene and circumstance to apply to their needs and be of practical help in the present, were destined before long to receive a surprise, it may be said a shock, in some of his later poems, and in most of his later prose writings. "A serious generation," so we were told, "found something wanting in 'the idle singer of an empty day;'; they wanted more body in their poetry—more 'criticism of life'—a more courageous endeavour to stand up to the problems of the age and make the best of them, instead of fleeing for refuge into fairyland." They experienced from reading "The Earthly Paradise" the drowsy sensations of "lotus eating." They felt themselves aggrieved at "the constant effort to detach poetry from modern life and connect it with a past age of romance." They reproached the poet that he shrank from grappling with the questions of the day; yet it may be doubted whether, when Mr. Morris did come forward to express his views on a matter of public concern, his critics were satisfied. Anyhow, he vindicated himself once and for all from the charge of indifference to contemporary affairs. It was in the autumn of the year 1876. Through the length and breadth of Europe an outburst of indignation had followed the notorious Bulgarian atrocities; and more particularly in this country the demand for redress had rung forth clamant, peremptory. It seemed as though the misgovernment of the Turk really was going to be put a stop to once and for all. Time glided by, however, and nothing was done; when at the end of a few weeks a reaction set in and dominant opinion seemed unaccountably to have veered round, so that there was actually a likelihood

of England, under the Tory ministry, being driven to take up arms on the side of Turkey. Then it was that Mr. Morris addressed a letter, dated October 24th, to "The Daily News," under the heading "England and the Turks." Had we gone to the help of the victims of the Turks, Mr. Morris would have rejoiced, he said, "in such a war, and thought it wholly good. . . . I should have thought I had lived for something at last: to have seen all England just and in earnest, . . . and our country honoured throughout all the world." But, on the contrary, as things were, after three weeks he found England, to his sorrow, "mocked throughout all the world." The many resolutions that had but recently been passed calling for the punishment of the Turkish "thieves and murderers" had proved mere empty words; while the rumour in the air to the effect that England was going to war on behalf of the Turks filled Mr. Morris with consternation, and impelled him to protest in the most formal and forcible way he could. "I who am writing this," he said, "am one of a large class of men—quiet men, who usually go about their own business, heeding public matters less than they ought, and afraid to speak in such a huge concourse as the English nation, however much they may feel, but who are now stung into bitterness by thinking how helpless they are in a public matter that touches them so closely." Such a war as threatened was a monstrous shame, a disaster, a curse. Of so "cynically unjust" a proceeding Morris was convinced that "nothing could come . . . but shame in defeat, shame in victory." "I appeal," he said, "to the working men, and pray them to look to it that if this shame falls upon them they will certainly remember it and be burdened by it when their day clears for them, and they attain all, and more than all, they now are striving for." And in conclusion, "I beg with humility to be allowed to inscribe myself, in the company of Mr. Gladstone and Mr. Freeman, and all men that I esteem, as an hysterical sentimentalist,"—for such, after all, was the worst taunt with which their opponents knew how to reproach them. The whole letter is astonishingly modern and apposite to present circumstances. In fact,

with the alteration of certain names of persons and places, it reads as if it had been written but yesterday.

Mr. Morris again had occasion to come before the public under somewhat similar circumstances at the beginning of 1878. At that time, it will be remembered, there seemed imminent prospect of England being dragged into the Russo-Turkish struggle, in active support of the Ottoman cause. The sentiment of this country was divided on the subject, and party feeling was strong on either side. Various meetings were held in different parts to discuss the situation. In London, on January 16th, two meetings were held to advocate the preservation of neutrality by the nation in respect of Eastern affairs. The first meeting took place in the afternoon at Willis's Rooms. It was organized by the committee to promote the free navigation of the Straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus, the Hon. and Rev. W. H. Fremantle in the chair. William Morris was present, and delivered a speech in which he pronounced the Turks to be, in his opinion, irreformable (prophetic words which have received the saddest confirmation in the recent massacres of Armenians in Constantinople and in the East—events fresh in everybody's memory), denounced the "war at any price" party, and concluded by insisting that "the country ought to offer the most earnest resistance to schemes that were a disgrace to the names of peace, goodwill, and justice."

In the evening of the same day another meeting with the same objects was convened at Exeter Hall by the Eastern Question Association and the Workmen's Neutrality Committee, Morris being present on this occasion also. In the early part of the proceedings was read from the platform a song, in five stanzas of eight lines each, commencing "Wake, London lads," written by William Morris in support of the intention of the meeting. A copy of these verses, printed on a broadside for distribution, had been placed in the hands of every person entering the hall, so that, when they were sung by the choir to the tune of "The Hardy Norseman's Home of Yore," a large

number of the audience took part in the singing. Mr. Mundella, M.P., was in the chair, and at the close Mr. Morris seconded the vote of thanks to him for presiding. The platform tickets for this Neutrality Demonstration bore a vignette designed by Burne-Jones, entitled "Blind War." As they would have of course to be given up by all who availed themselves of them, specimens of the ticket must now be exceedingly rare. Mr. Fairfax Murray, however, has a copy both of the platform ticket and of the broadside, bound up in a volume of pamphlets collected by the late William Bell Scott, bearing on the Eastern Question.

From this time forward, except the translation of the *Odyssey* in 1887, already mentioned, Morris published no volume of poetry until the appearance of "Poems by the Way," in 1891; neither, until the same year (1891), which witnessed also the first issue of the *Saga Library*, had he published any more translations from the Icelandic since the appearance of "Three Northern Love Stories" in 1875. The contrast is very striking between the prolific output of poetry in his earlier years, *i.e.*, from 1858 to 1877, during which time six important works (including "The Earthly Paradise," itself equivalent to four) appeared, and the later period, from 1878 to his death in 1896, during which he published but two poetical works, or three, if the verse translation of "L'Ordene de Chevalerie," comprised, under the title of "The Ordination of Knighthood," together with "The Order of Chivalry," in one volume, in 1893, be counted.

It would seem almost as though there were few middle courses open for a poet to choose between the two extreme alternatives of his art on the one hand, and the world of living humankind on the other. Of the class who are absolutely unconcerned with anything beyond their own art, Keats may be taken as an example, in whose poetry hardly a single allusion to contemporary affairs is to be found; Keats whose imagination was lulled into a sort of charmed sleep, out of which all his life through he never waked to any of the sterner realities of daily existence. There is the poet, on the contrary, who, at starting, is keenly alive

to the problems of his day; ay, he whose gift of foresight is so much more penetrating than that of the vast mass of his contemporaries that it enables him to anticipate far ahead of them all—so far, indeed, that he becomes himself unpractical. Such a man was Byron, who, born aristocrat though he was, did not hesitate to utter sentiments that were counter to all the hereditary prejudices of his class, and could not fail to estrange and isolate him. "The king-times," he wrote, "are fast finishing; there will be blood shed like water and tears like must, but the peoples will conquer in the end. I shall not live to see it, but I foresee it." A political career being impossible for him under these circumstances, he threw himself, as Matthew Arnold points out, upon poetry as his organ, and from his advanced position turned deliberately, in all a pessimist's despair of the present, to excess and luxury, for distraction. Morris avoided either of these courses, as also he was wise enough to avoid another error of an opposite kind, viz., the poet's who, striving to be the prophet of his age, and to proclaim his message through the medium of his poetry, misses the point at which he has aimed, and, becoming overwhelmed in a maze of tortuous emotions, only succeeds in providing intellectual conundrums for learned Browning societies to wrangle over. With Morris it was altogether different. Arriving at last, through a process the reverse of Byron's, that is, through poetry and the arts, face to face with the tremendous study of modern life, he yet kept his poetry as far as possible disengaged from the entangling mesh of social and political problems, and at the time when these came uppermost in his mind he practically abandoned poetry. Hence the disproportionate quantity produced in his later years. Hence also the fact that such poems as he did produce were all of them shorter pieces; his perfect sense of the fitness of things showing him the incompatibility of heroic poetry with any modern theme. For a nineteenth century epic is assuredly a contradiction in terms. "An epic poem on a historical subject," as the "Edinburgh Review" rightly says, "is a form of composition which the ex-

perience of poets and the progress of criticism seem to have condemned. It is difficult to imagine an epic written now upon the Peninsular or the Crimean War. As civilization advances the poet is driven to deal with purely imaginative stories, or with legends of a remote past. Information becomes more accessible, and men become more sensitive to inaccuracies in matters of fact. How could a poet re-cast the Crimean War so as to give it anything of the poetic shape of the Wars of Thebes or Troy? He would meet with insuperable obstacles both in style and subject. How could he prevent his language from becoming at times irredeemably prosaic? . . . The true material for an epic would seem to be, not recent fact, but the remote memories of a people's past, glorified and shaped by the imagination of successive generations, or the artistic efforts of successive minstrels." The age of skald and bard, mouthpieces and inspirers of the people, is now passed away. Much as one may regret it, one has to face the fact that at the present day the oracle of the masses finds its chosen mode of utterance in the prose of the newspaper; and that poetry—good poetry—is not the language that suits them. The only kind that does appeal to them is the doggerel recited on the stage of the music-hall. But to such depths of laurelled degradation it was of course inconceivable that Morris could ever have suffered himself to sink.

But unmodern in theme and mould as was William Morris's poetical work, it is not to be denied that, at an early date in his career, he betrayed symptoms of unrest and dissatisfaction with our existing condition of things. Thus an examination of "The Earthly Paradise" will disclose tokens of a conflict, as it were, going on in the poet's mind between his art and his politics, either striving for the mastery. Mr. Oscar Triggs, indeed, professes to trace a logical and continuous development of ideas in Morris from the beginning, and to show that both his later and earlier writings harmonize and interpenetrate. "The poet's Socialism," writes the American critic, "grew out of his love of art, which inflamed him with a desire to

bring all men within its domain, while the 'Earthly Paradise' reveals a man who chose to live before he wrote. He invites us to

'Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town ;
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
And dream of London, small, and white, and clean,
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green ;'

and shows us Chaucer's London that he may recover for us the conditions of life which made possible the peculiar spring-tide quality of Chaucer's poems. And before he wrote he repeated for himself the principles of living, only from which pure art can spring. The latter work announces the prophecy implied in the former." "Just consider," said Morris in an address to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, "the immeasurable difference between the surroundings of the workmen of the present day and the workmen of the fourteenth century. Consider London of the fourteenth century—a smallish town, beautiful from one end to the other; streets of low whitewashed houses, with a big Gothic church standing in the middle of it; a town surrounded by walls, with a forest of church towers and spires, besides the cathedral and the abbeys and priories; every one of the houses in it, nay, every shed, bearing in it a certain amount of absolute, definite, distinct, conscientious art. Think of the difference between that and the London of to-day, whose houses either have no attempt at ornament or architecture about them, or, where they have ornament, make us regret that there is such a thing; and at least where art exists, it is paid for by the foot, and only comes in as part of the conditions of contract which rules all society among us; whereas in the old town the ornament grew spontaneously out of the method of work. The modern conditions of labour were not known in the old time. Yet even this difference between the towns in the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries does not express the difference which exists between the workmen of the two ages. It

is far greater than that. Just consider what England was in the fourteenth century. The population, rather doubtful, but I suppose you may take it at about four millions. Think then of the amount of beautiful and dignified buildings which those four millions built; of whom there were, of course, the regular proportion of women, children, and idlers. As we go from parish to parish in England we see in each a church which is, or at all events has been, beautiful, and in every town we see important and sometimes huge and most elaborate buildings, the very sight of which fills us with a kind of awe at the patience and skill which produced them. But further, we have to consider not only those churches and houses which we see, but also those which have been destroyed, and all those other beautiful abbey buildings, *e.g.*, of which only a few relics have been left, and of which Cobbett truly says that at the time of the Reformation England must have looked like a country which had been subject to a cruel invasion. Those buildings also, though they contained little upholstery contained much art: pictures, metal work, carvings, tapestry, and the like, altogether forming a prodigious mass of art, produced by a scanty population. Try to imagine that. Why, if we were asked, supposing we had the capacity, to reproduce the whole of those buildings with their contents, we should have to reply, 'The country is not rich enough—every capitalist in the country would be ruined before it could be done.' Is not that strange? Surely there must be some reason for that." And so the more Morris pondered on these things, the more wide and accurate his knowledge of history and of the literature and art of the Middle Ages became, the more thoroughly was he persuaded that "the art of that time was the outcome of the life of that time," and the more was he struck by the terrible contrast presented by the life of the workmen of the past and the life of the workmen of to-day, and the more profound grew his sense of dissatisfaction with the present conditions of society. But to go back again some twenty years, it is in "The Life and Death of Jason," perhaps the last place where one would look to find it,—

so remote is the classic legend both in scene and subject from the life of our own day—that the first note of discontent is sounded. Apostrophizing therein his master Chaucer, Morris refers to ourselves as being “meshed within this smoky net of unrejoicing labour.” On the other hand, in the Prologue to “The Earthly Paradise,” published a year later, he seems to repudiate, as being but a “dreamer of dreams,” the care and responsibility of taking part in measures of reform. “Why should I strive,” he asks, “to set the crooked straight?” and in protest asseverates that he is only “the idle singer of an empty day.” For the issue was undecided; was perhaps even undefined as yet. But the mere fact of the poet reasoning on the matter at all shows that the idea of setting the crooked straight *had* already presented itself to him, in some form or other, as a possible duty to be undertaken, and that the rival claims had ere now begun to contend within him. “His mood changed from ‘The Earthly Paradise,’” writes Mr. Walter Crane, “though even there, in the opening verses, the very fact that he seemed conscious of the turmoil and trouble of the world outside would indicate what afterwards happened—that he would finally be compelled to listen to it, to form an opinion, and take his part in the great industrial battle. That he did not hesitate on which side, or with whom, to cast his lot, is not to be wondered at when one considers the thoroughness of his nature.”

Abundant indications of revolutionary tendency are to be found in the body of the poem. Thus, in “Bellerophon in Argos,” there occurs the stirring injunction:

“Yea, and bethink thee, mayst thou not be born
To raise the crushed and succour the forlorn,
And in the place of sorrow to set mirth,
Gaining a great name through the wondering earth?”

If the high purpose here set forth may not be pronounced as necessarily Socialistic, at any rate the author’s views with regard to the injustice of privileged class government are definite and unmistakable. Take, for instance, another passage from the last-quoted poem:

THE ART OF

"Do thou bide at home,
And let the king hear what may even come
To a king's ears; meddle thou not, nor make
With any such; still shall the brass pot break
The earthen pot—a lord is thanked for what
A poor man often has in prison sat."

In another passage he says:

"Some smiled doubtfully
For thinking how few men escape the yoke
From this or that man's hand, and how most folk
Must needs be kings and slaves the while they live,
And take from this man, and to that man give
Things hard enow:"

in another:

"Like the wise ants, a kingless, happy folk
We long have been, not galled by any yoke."

And in another:

"Ever must the rich man hate the poor."

At the end of the tale of "The Proud King" the writer bursts forth:

"But ye, O kings, think all that ye have got
To be but gawds cast out upon some heap,
And stolen while the Master was asleep."

And once again he gives vent to his indignation as follows:

"Many-peopled earth!
In foolish anger and in foolish mirth,
In causeless wars that never had an aim,
In worshipping the kings that bring thee shame,
In spreading lies that hide wrath in their breast,
In breaking up the short-lived days of rest,—
In all thy folk care nought for, how they cling
Each unto each, fostering the foolish thing,
Nought worth, grown out of nought, that lightly lies
'Twixt throat and lips, and yet works miseries!"

And here he expresses his yearning desire for the realization of his ideal:

"Ah! good and ill,
When will your strife the fated measure fill?
When will the tangled veil be drawn away
To show us all that unimagined day?"

A section of Morris's admirers would have preferred to

have him engaged incessantly and exclusively in active propaganda of Socialism. If the truth must be told, his having written poetry at all is an awkward fact, and one of which they are rather ashamed. In the eyes of these people every moment Morris gave to art and letters was so much wasted time that needs apology, that can be justified only on the plea that it was the recreation he allowed himself as a relief from the arduous strain of political agitation. But this is a poor compliment to pay their hero. It is practically an assertion that in the vast amount of poetry and prose romance he produced he was not in earnest! Was ever trifling so elaborate and so sustained known before? No; it will not do. Morris's poetry was neither the plaything to which he resorted for pastime, nor the narcotic by which he induced oblivion. As long as he was able to do so with a free conscience he devoted himself to poetry heart and soul. But there was that spirit latent within him which was bound to assert itself sooner or later; that spirit which, when he at first became conscious of it, maybe he would fain have repressed, but such that nevertheless was destined to become the ascendant and in effect the controlling force of his life. The first intimations of its presence occur in the "Jason," as has been shown above; it makes itself felt more manifestly and more persistently in the "Earthly Paradise." To all seeming dormant (or is it stifled by effort?) in "Love is Enough" and in "Sigurd," it breaks forth imperious thereafter, never again to be subordinated, but to become ever more and more paramount as the poet's years increased.

The die had long since been cast, long since the choice of paths made irrevocably, when, in 1891, Morris published his "Poems by the Way." The collection ranged over a long period—included, in fact, all the best of the shorter poems that Morris had written since "The Defence of Guenevere." Of these a considerable number had already been published in magazines and papers, viz., beside those named already, the poem called "Of the Three Seekers," in "To-Day," January, 1884; "Meeting in Winter," in

Macmillan's "English Illustrated Magazine," March, 1884; "The Hall and the Wood," in the same of February, 1890; and "The Day of Days," in "Time," November, 1890. The last should be included among the Socialist poems, like "The Message of the March Wind," "Mother and Son," "The Voice of Toil," "The Day is Coming," and "All for the Cause," which had previously made their appearance in political journals or pamphlets. There were also certain verses for pictures by Burne-Jones, *e.g.*, the four stanzas for "The Briar Rose" series of paintings, exhibited at Messrs. Thomas Agnew and Sons' in 1890; and others for tapestry, *e.g.*, "The Woodpecker," "Pomona," "Flora," and "The Orchard." But not the least notable feature in "Poems by the Way" was a series of ballads translated from the Icelandic and the Danish, and a certain further number of original ballads inspired by them. In the poem "Mother and Son," according to "The Academy," "the piece that is perhaps the strongest Mr. Morris has written, . . . there are strokes with a fearless ring that reminds one strongly of Rossetti's 'Jenny;' and the whole volume, indeed, not only betokens a splendid vitality of gift . . . but recalls at every turn that its author is one of a famous fraternity . . . who have been animated, despite all their differences, by a certain common spirit, and endowed with a similar cunning in the craft of song." "In none of his previous works," says another writer, "does Mr. Morris show an eye and a hand so sure as here;" and "in all that is noble in temper and beautiful in art this volume could hardly be surpassed, even by the poet of 'Sigurd.' . . . Howsoever rapturously the poet may delight in the rich and wonderful world in which he finds himself, the moment he stays to reflect, the moment he stays to ask himself what it all means, there comes upon him that high seriousness, that 'sad earnestness,' which is the foundation of the great poetry of Hellas. . . . Although in Mr. Morris's case the high poetic temper does not wane, but, on the contrary, waxes with years, its expression is mellowed now." The work, representing, as it does, manifold phases of thought and emotion, certainly

could not be charged with aloofness from human interests, the characteristic which, as it has been shown, many had deplored in Morris's earlier poems. The song, once languorous, it was remarked, now "vibrates oftener;" the former "faint voices . . . have begun to speak in more human tones." A writer in "The Academy" recognizes in "Poems by the Way," "a passion for equal justice, a sympathy with outcast classes, and a vision of coming redress," as imparting to this work a strength and substance which could not be claimed for Morris's work in the days of "The Earthly Paradise." Again, "another influence . . . that of the old Norse life and literature . . . just like that of Socialism, is certainly one that has given additional vigour and glory to the poet's verse."