



MR. WILLIAM MORRIS AT THE KELMSCOTT PRESS.

EVERYBODY knows, or ought to know, Kelmscott House, the great plain white house facing the river at Hammersmith, which is Mr. Morris's town abode. Even those who have never heard of the little grey-stone manor house on the far-away headwaters of the Thames, whence comes the name, now made familiar through his affection to so much of the world as is moved by beauty. Kelmscott House is associated with every one of the fields of Mr. Morris's super-human activity, was the birthplace of the celebrated Hammersmith carpets, and for a long while the virtual centre of the English Socialist movement. In one or another way, there are but few among those who read or think or care for art to whom it is altogether unknown. But everybody does not know, even among those who cherish the productions of the Kelmscott Press among their most sacred treasures, that the Press also finds its home upon the Upper Mall, but a few doors east away from Kelmscott House. As will be seen from our Illustration, the Press is housed in what was once a family mansion, that has long since fallen upon unprosperous days, has lost its view of the river, been shouldered into the background by waterside cottages, and is now split unequally to serve productive purposes.

I found Mr. Morris in his study at Kelmscott House, surrounded by his books—literally so, for the walls are lined

the whole way round with crowded shelves. Before him lay a pile of proof-sheets of most imposing appearance—great folio pages, many of them with woodcuts and marvellous borders, which proved to be part of the magnificent edition of Chaucer Mr. Morris is preparing. When these had been carefully read through and plentifully marked, the “master-printer” notified that he was about to take them into the Press and personally see that his directions were properly carried out. I gladly accepted his invitation to “go along too,” coupling my acceptance with a promise not to bother him with questions until he gave me leave.

There is almost nothing to describe in the Press itself. Nothing whatever which allows of eloquent word-painting. No splendour of architecture or lavishness of ornament. No intricate machinery. No triumph of modern invention or engineering skill. The only motor is human muscle, and the appliances upon which it acts are of the very simplest description. In fact, the one thing which most forcibly strikes the visitor is the utter simplicity of the means employed to produce so much beauty. There is nothing whatever in the whole place that could puzzle Caxton himself were he to happen in. Indeed, after about twenty minutes spent in realising the advantages gained by the use of metal instead of wood—in the frames of the presses and elsewhere—any one of the old printers might fall into

place and resume the practice of his craft, were he allowed to reincarnate himself and come here.

By-the-way, upon one detail of his craft he would have to spend more than twenty minutes—the handling of an ink-roller instead of his accustomed dabber. Simple as it looks when done

found him a perfect “subject,” despite his preoccupation with the technical details of the work before him, and that his kindness and patience in explaining the recondite mysteries of artistic typography could not have been surpassed. I came away at last, feeling as though I could pass a pretty stiff examination in the art

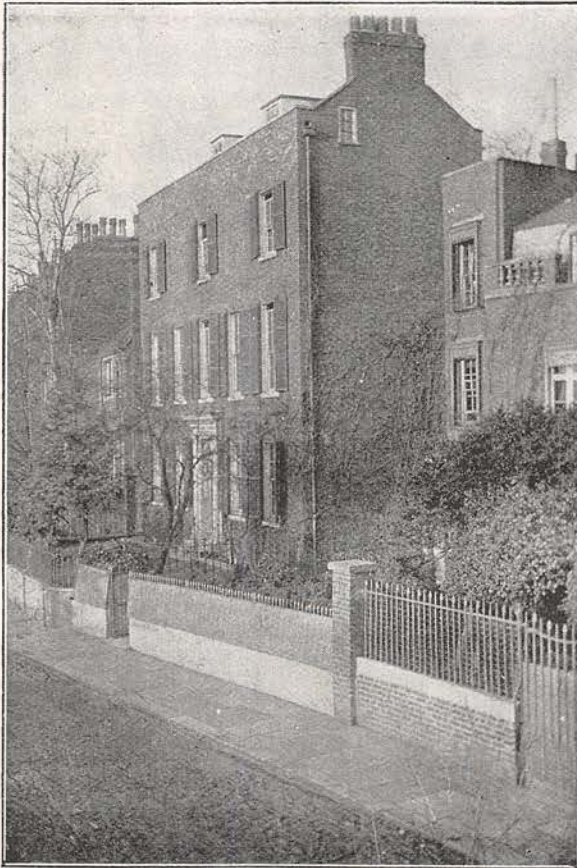


Photo by Halliday Sparling.

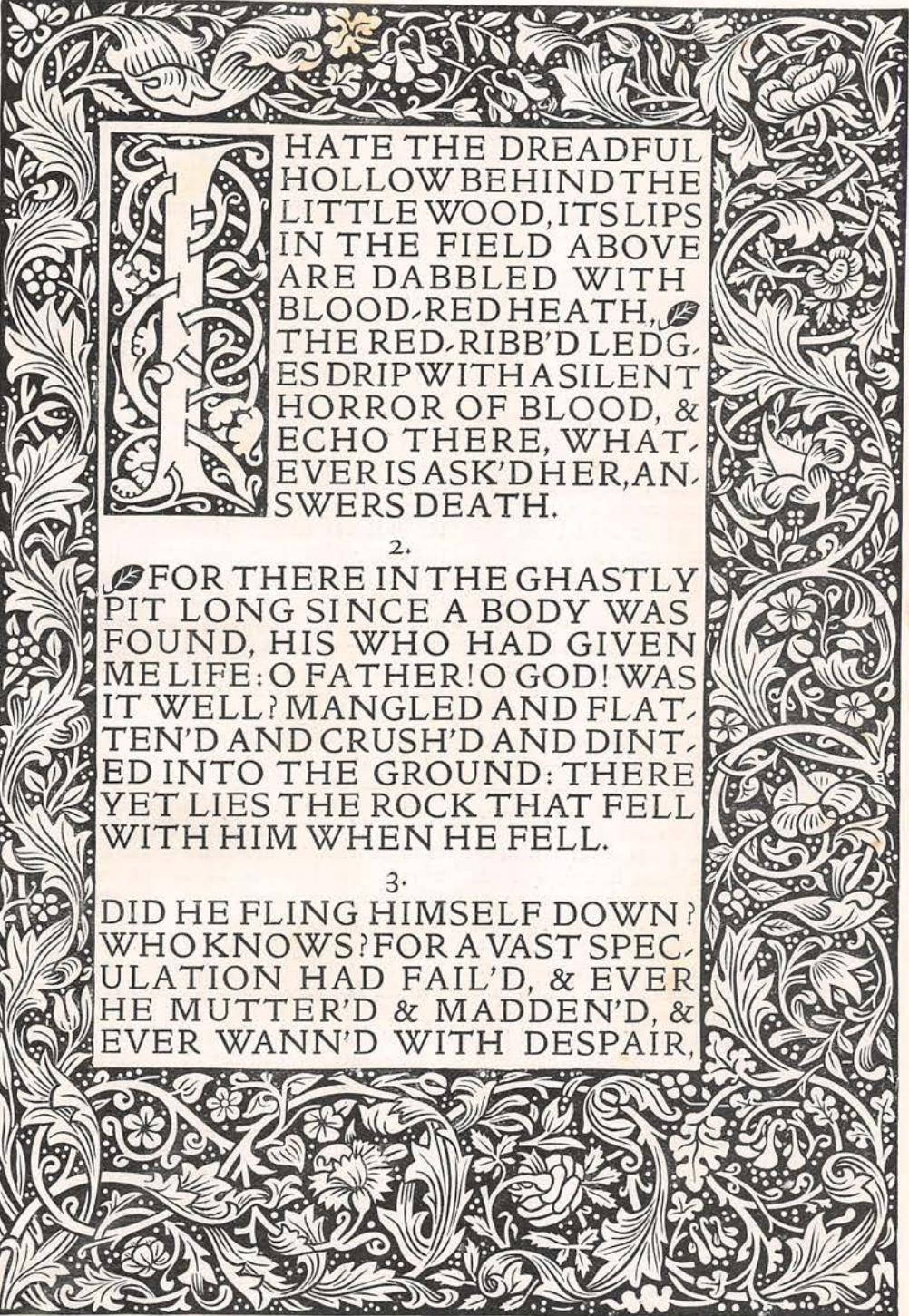
KELMSCOTT HOUSE.

by an expert, the proper roll and swing is not acquired in twenty minutes: *experto crede*.

As we went from room to room, inspected the press-work, questioned the compositors, and stood by the “stone” watching the wonderful “weepers” and “bloomers” assume their proper positions on the page, I found that to keep my promise was altogether out of my power, and plied Mr. Morris with questions. I must do him the justice to say that I

and mystery of printing. Though I don't feel so confident now.

I quickly found that the Kelmscott Press, like most important institutions—among which it may by this time claim to stand—has a history which dates from some time before it actually came into being. It was not until 1888 that Mr. Morris first turned his attention to the possibilities of modern printing. Until then, though he had always been a lover and a buyer of beautiful books, it does not



**H**ATE THE DREADFUL  
HOLLOW BEHIND THE  
LITTLE WOOD, ITS LIPS  
IN THE FIELD ABOVE  
ARE DABBLED WITH  
BLOOD-RED HEATH,  
THE RED-RIBB'D LEDG-  
ES DRIP WITH A SILENT  
HORROR OF BLOOD, &  
ECHO THERE, WHAT,  
EVER IS ASK'D HER, AN-  
SWERS DEATH.

2.

FOR THERE IN THE GHASTLY  
PIT LONG SINCE A BODY WAS  
FOUND, HIS WHO HAD GIVEN  
ME LIFE: O FATHER! O GOD! WAS  
IT WELL? MANGLED AND FLAT-  
TEN'D AND CRUSH'D AND DINT-  
ED INTO THE GROUND: THERE  
YET LIES THE ROCK THAT FELL  
WITH HIM WHEN HE FELL.

3.

DID HE FLING HIMSELF DOWN?  
WHO KNOWS? FOR A VAST SPEC-  
ULATION HAD FAIL'D, & EVER  
HE MUTTER'D & MADDEN'D, &  
EVER WANN'D WITH DESPAIR,

seem to have occurred to him to spend time and trouble upon the printing of his own works; "but that was in the days of ignorance." Printing remained among the extremely small number of decorative arts which he had not mastered and practised. As may be seen from his "Odyssey," published in 1887, there is nothing distinctive or personal in the appearance of his books. Of course, their printing is good of its kind; type and paper and relativity of type to page have been thought of, "though I sinned in the matter of large-paper copies." When all is said in their favour that can be, they remain respectable specimens of the "printing of the marketplace," and nothing more.

In 1888 came the first exhibition held by the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, in the preparation of which Mr. Morris took a leading part. In that Exhibition was included a selection of modern book-printing and woodcuts. Prefacing the catalogue were a number of essays, each dealing with some art or craft from the point of view of a practical worker. That which treated of printing was written by Mr. Emery Walker, who also delivered a technical lecture upon the same subject during the course of the Exhibition, illustrating his remarks by means of lantern-slides. Alike in the preparation of his essay and lecture, as in the selection of his slides, Mr. Walker had the advice and assistance of Mr. Morris, from books in whose possession, indeed, a large number of the photographs were taken. Many and long continued were the conferences *à deux* held for the purpose of "talking type," and, as they almost invariably took place in that book-lined work-room already alluded to, there was no lack of examples with which to enforce a point or uphold an argument. From Schweynheim and Pannartz to Miller and Richard, from Gutenberg to the Chiswick Press, the discussions ranged over all that had been or could be done in designing, making, and setting type, in the proportion and presswork of the printed page. Needless to say that modern printing, apart from the work of the Chiswick Press and a very few others, came in for wholesale condemnation. One outcome of the discussions was a belief on the part of Mr. Morris that even modern printing under commercial conditions and the domination of the machine need not be so unutterably bad as it was. And he determined to show cause for his belief, and to demonstrate what might be brought about by a little thought and patience.

In the second Arts and Crafts Exhibition (1889) there was shown a copy of his then latest work, "The House of the Wolfings," specially printed under his direction by the Chiswick Press. In this, as compared with any of its predecessors, the change is great and obvious. The type in which it is printed has since become familiar to the reading public from having been used in several of the best printed books of recent years, but was then a comparative novelty. It is founded upon a Basel type of the sixteenth century, and is the exclusive property of the Chiswick Press. The character of the type, the size, colour, and quality of the paper, the proportions of the page and the relativity of the two pages in an opening, were all carefully thought over and determined. As for the titlepage, with its solid title and specially written piece of verse, device and motto in one, it offended in almost every detail against some accepted typographical superstition. In the "Roots of the Mountains" (1890), the change has gone further still. Type, paper, and page-proportion all show a further change, and the time-honoured headline has disappeared in favour of a shoulder-note, while the pages are numbered in the middle of the tail-margin instead of in the usual top corner. The page has gained immensely in solidity and a look of completeness. It is difficult to see what more could have been done with the means at disposal.

By this time the craft of printing had thoroughly taken hold of Mr. Morris and aroused him to the mastery of its technique. Having got as far as even the Chiswick Press would carry him, there was nothing for it but to set to work upon his own account. "I thought it would be nice to have a book or two one cared for printed in the way one would like to see them."

The first essential was a fount of type which should combine the beauty of the types used by the old printers with a certain regard for readability by modern eyes. And this Mr. Morris set himself to design. In weaving or woodcutting, both of which crafts he mastered long ago, there still survived at the time of his pupillage a certain amount of old tradition. It was possible to find men still at work in those crafts whose methods and training were those of a period antedating the reign of steam. But in the designing of type there was nothing of the kind.

"It's curious enough when you come to think of it," said Mr. Morris, "what



*Photo by F. Hollyer.*

MR. WILLIAM MORRIS.

happened with printing. It was born full grown and perfect, but began to deteriorate almost at once. For one thing, of course, it was invented just at the end of the mediæval period, when everything was already pretty far gone. And its history, as a whole, has practically coincided with the growth of the commercial system, the requirements of which

letters. It must not be laterally compressed, and its thicks and thins must not show the contrast which in its extreme form has so much to do with the "sweltering hideousness" of the Bodoni letter, "the most illegible type that was ever cut." Upon all these points there are elaborate rules which are accepted by the ordinary type-designer. "But," said



*Photo by Halliday Sparling.*

THE KELMSCOTT PRESS.

have been fatal, so far as beauty is concerned, to anything which has come within its scope."

In default of a living tradition, there was nothing to be done but to go back to the fountain-head, or as near to it as might be, and start thence afresh. As the type was to be aimed at modern eyes, it must be "roman." As it was to be clear and easy to read, as well as beautiful, it must be properly placed upon its "body," so as to show a definite proportion of white between each pair of

Mr. Morris, "they are merely mechanical rules, not the living traditions of a craft; and, what's more, they're all exasperatingly wrong, and prescribe exactly the reverse of what they ought to. They seem to have been made by mathematicians or engineers, certainly not by artists." The various requirements of a really good type received the fullest existing fulfilment in the "generous and logical designs of the fifteenth century Venetian printers, at the head of whom stands Nicholas Jenson. Jenson carried the development of roman

about as far as it can go. I must say that I consider his roman type to be the best and clearest ever struck, and a fitting starting-point for a possible new departure."

Upon the type used by Jenson, then, Mr. Morris set to work, and patiently analysed it until he "got the bones of it in his head," or, in other words, had mastered the principles upon which the

completed, and towards the end of 1890 actual work was begun.

At this time the entire staff of the Kelmscott Press consisted of one man and a very small boy, and it was housed in a tiny cottage. In violent contrast with the size of the establishment was that of the first book it embarked upon. No less an undertaking than the printing of "The Golden Legend" of William Caxton,



*Photo by G. S. Beresford.*

MISS MAY MORRIS (MRS. HALLIDAY SPARLING).

old designer had worked. Not that other designers of the "great period," more especially Rossi, were by any means neglected. When these principles had been discovered and abstracted, they had to be modified into accordance with the special aims which Mr. Morris had set before him, and necessarily underwent a further modification in the process through the influence of his individual taste and habits of work. As fast as the letters were designed they were handed over to the punch-cutter. As fast as the punches could be cut and the matrices made the types were cast. The fount was rapidly

ultimately published in September 1892 in three large quarto volumes, containing altogether about thirteen hundred pages. This was edited and seen through the press by Mr. F. S. Ellis. From the fact of its having been first used upon "The Golden Legend," the roman type has always since been known as "the Golden." This, by-the-way, once led a country bookseller into advertising one of the Kelmscott Press books as "printed from golden type." On another occasion the editor of an American trade magazine remarked that "for all he could see" the books might just as well have been printed from

ordinary type-metal! For similar reasons the two black-letter founts designed later on by Mr. Morris have received the names of the "Troy" and the "Chaucer."

Although Mr. Morris had started the Press purely for his own pleasure, in order to see what he could do as a printer and in order to have a few copies of his favourite books printed after his own fashion, and had no idea to begin with that any demand would exist for such things, he speedily found that it would be impossible to maintain the Press as a private toy even had he desired to do so. The growing dissatisfaction with machine work, and the desire for that in the doing of which the hand of the craftsman has had free play—a dissatisfaction and a desire with the creation of which Mr. Morris himself has had as much as any living man to do—had gone far enough, even among book-buyers, to create a demand for his books as soon as he was known to be at work upon them. Man after man was added to the staff until the little cottage could hold no more, when the Press was compelled to migrate into its present home. And still it waxes larger, and has again outgrown its shell. The offices, readers' and store rooms, and one press, are housed elsewhere.

Having got his type, there was the paper and the ink, to say nothing of the binding, to be thought of. I pass over the troubles Mr. Morris met with, only noting that they were very great, before he found a paper-maker who could make for him the paper he wanted, or an ink-maker who could come up to his requirements. The type he had, and the ornaments he could design, and for them an engraver was at hand in his friend Mr. W. H. Hooper; but for the ink and paper he had to go to others and get them to carry out his wishes. When it came to printing some copies of the "Glittering Plain" upon vellum, there was even more difficulty than over the paper. However, even that was managed without having to go to the length of storming the Vatican and robbing the Pope, "who buys up the better part of the best vellum going."

The "Glittering Plain," a romance by Mr. Morris himself, was the second book put in hand, but the first published, being finished, as the colophon declares, on April 4, 1891. Two hundred copies only were printed on paper, and six on vellum. It was followed in September by Mr. Morris's "Poems by the Way," of which three hundred paper and thirteen vellum were printed. In this book the shoulder-notes, refrains, etc., are printed in red,

the "Glittering Plain" having been wholly in black. These books, as most of their successors have been, were fully subscribed and at a premium long before they were ready for delivery. "I am afraid," said Mr. Morris, "that the 'fore-stallers and regraters' got most of the benefit; but although I don't like that, I don't see what's to be done to alter it as things are."

In May 1892 the Kelmscott Press had risen to the height of a printed list of its productions, in which, under the heading of "Books Already Printed," appear Mr. Wilfrid Blunt's "Love Lyrics and Songs of Proteus," Mr. Ruskin's "Nature of Gothic," and Mr. Morris's own "Defence of Guenevere" and "Dream of John Ball." Copies of this list itself are now eagerly sought for by collectors, and are the more prized for the fact that they differ from all subsequent issues in being printed on the inside pages only of the half-sheet, without half-title or anything else upon the outside.

A glance at the latest list shows that the tale of completed work done by the Kelmscott Press runs up to thirty separate works, ranging between the giant "Golden Legend" and the tiny "Gothic Architecture." Of the latter, by-the-way, there were nearly sixteen hundred copies sold, and even then there was a cry for more. Of the books already printed the greater number are hopelessly out of print. A few copies each of about a dozen of them are, however, still within the reach of the happy mortal whose gold-lined pockets allow him to covet them.

"And which of them all were you most interested in, Mr. Morris?"

"Whichever I had in hand at any given moment. You see each of them has its own individuality, and one was interested in all of them from one point of view or another. There are what I will call for the moment the archæological books, the Caxtons: 'The Golden Legend,' 'The Recuyell,' 'Godefrey of Boloyne,' and 'Reynard the Foxe.' They have a common interest as coming from Caxton and as belonging to that curious period in the history of the English language when the old had hopelessly gone to pieces and the new had not yet formulated itself. And then, besides all that, as history or as story-book, they have all of them a particular value. The little 'Psalmi Penitentiales' has not only an archæological but a very high literary value. Quite different interests attach, of course, to the modern books, such as Ruskin's 'Nature of



Gothic,' Swinburne's 'Atalanta,' Tennyson's 'Maud,' and Rossetti's 'Ballads and Narrative Poems' and 'Sonnets and Lyrical Poems.' In all these cases one was glad to have the opportunity of putting good work into a shape that seemed worthy of it. Then there are the illustrated books. The 'Story of the Glittering Plain,' with woodcuts by Mr. Walter Crane, has already been published. 'The Well at the World's End,' with woodcuts by Mr. A. J. Gaskin, is nearly ready. And the biggest undertaking on which the Press has yet embarked—the folio Chaucer, which will contain nearly eighty woodcuts, designed by Sir Edward Burne-Jones. Indeed, you may say that I am deeply interested in everything I do. And for the sufficiently good reason that I don't do anything that doesn't interest me in one way or another."

The Chaucer, which is the most important work immediately in hand, and to which I have before alluded, will be certainly the most magnificent book ever produced on an English press. But I hesitate to say much about it, lest I should arouse desires which it is impossible to gratify, inasmuch as every copy is sold, six months before its possible completion. It is being edited by Mr. F. S. Ellis. Next in order of the larger works that are in preparation come "The Tragedies,

Histories, and Comedies of William Shakespeare," edited by Dr. F. J. Furnivall, and "The Cronycles of Syr John Froissart," reprinted from Pynson's edition of Lord Berners' translation and edited by Mr. Halliday Sparling. The Shakespeare will be in several small quarto volumes, and the Froissart in two folio volumes with armorial borders, designed by Mr. Morris, and including the devices of the more important personages who figure in its pages.

Among the other books in preparation are selections from the poems of Coleridge and Herrick, the poems of Mr. Theodore Watts, the romance of "Syr Perceval" from the Thornton Manuscript, and a new prose romance, "Child Christopher," from the pen of Mr. Morris himself. Mr. Morris is also preparing for publication an annotated catalogue of his own wonderful collection of woodcut-books, early printed books and manuscripts, which is to be illustrated with over fifty facsimiles.

The Tenth Commandment was nowhere as I bowed myself out, after that long *tête-à-tête* amid books and books and books, especially after it had been interrupted by Mrs. Sparling (Miss May Morris), who came to show her father a lovely piece of embroidery of her design, intended for the adornment of his bed-chamber at Kelmscott.

A. B.