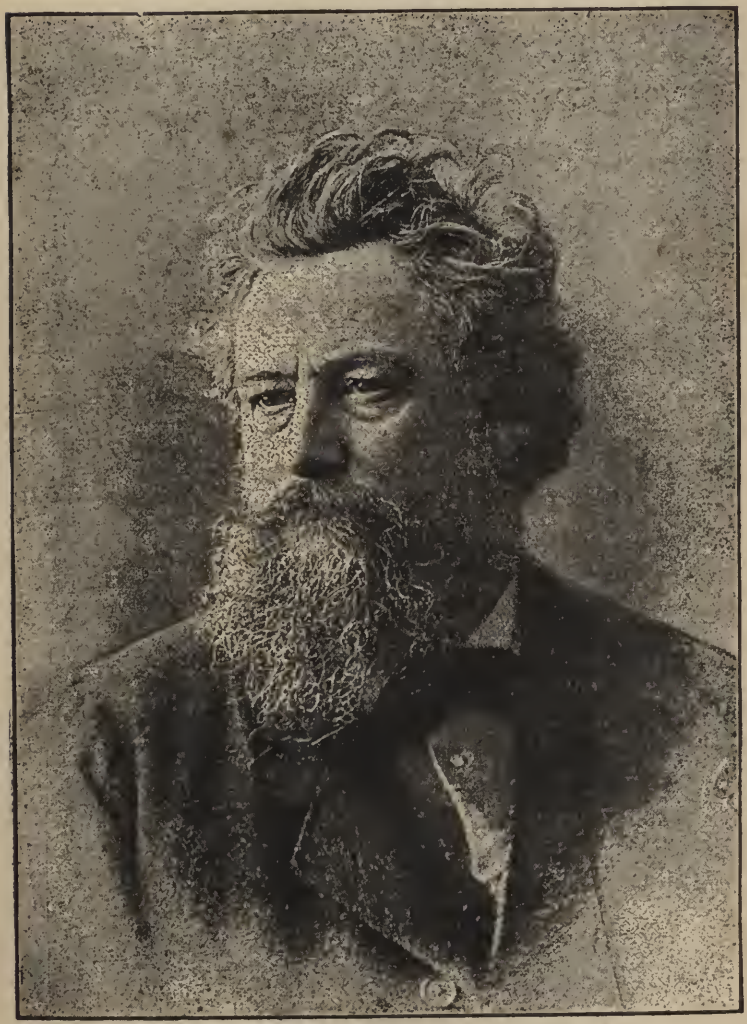
Hyndman.

HOW I BECAME A SOCIALIST.



WILLIAM MORRIS.

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INTRODUCTION.

SOCIALISTS of all countries will mourn with us the loss of our beloved comrade, friend, and leader, William Morris, with whose life and work for the cause our comrade, and his close friend, H. M. Hyndman, deals in the following article. His death has inflicted a loss upon the party which no living man can replace. Loved and revered by all who knew him, no man wielded a wider influence or commanded more universal esteem. In the very foremost rank of the art and literature of his time, even our most bitter opponents who affect to regard Socialism and Socialists with contempt and loathing, found their most poisoned darts fall pointless and harmless against the invulnerable shield presented by the enduring reputation and splendid genius of this our Bayard, without fear and without reproach. Nor was his Socialism, as some of his critics, anxious to rob our movement of his glorious name, try to make out, a mere sentimental expression of sympathy with suffering—the outcome of the revolt of his artistic sense against the squalor and artificiality of our day. "Dreamer of dreams" he called himself, as they delight to remind us; but that was at a time when, as he tells us in the article we here re-produce, he saw his ideal clear enough, but had no hope of realising it. That, as he further tells us, came later, when he joined the S.D.F., and had formed a hope of the realisation of his ideal, a hope which grew into certainty as he threw himself into the work of the movement. No, as this declaration proves and as our comrade Hyndman shows in his article, there was no half-heartedness about Morris's Socialism. He never did things by halves. He hated shams, and in whatever he undertook he was thorough. Brave, noble, and good, it may indeed be that we ne'er shall look upon his like again. But he lived his life, and life was real and earnest and pleasant to him. He is dead, but his work lives with us, and we know, as he knew and sang, that in the time to come:

"We who once were fools and dreamers then shall be the great and wise.
There amidst the world new builded shall our earthly deeds abide,
Though our names be all forgotten, and the tale of how we died."

"I strove with none, for none was worth my strife;
Nature I loved, and, next to nature, art;
I warmed both hands at the fire of life;
It sinks, and I am ready to depart."

WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR.

WILLIAM MORRIS.

WHEN I returned this morning from following the hearse which carried William Morris's body from that old house on the Mall at Hammersmith, where so many Socialists have gathered to hear the charming conversation of our dead comrade and leader, it was with the feeling common to us all that we have lost one whose place can never be filled. The last time I had seen him there was on a bright Sunday morning, just before his sea-trip to the North. He seemed to me much better than he had been on my previous visit, and he talked almost as quickly and vigorously as of old on the various topics which interested him, working the while with pencil and brush on a design that lay before him. With that frank, open-hearted expression of his feelings about himself to his friends which was habitual with him, he in nowise disguised how irksome his illness, with its inevitable restriction of his activity, was to him. "If it merely means that I am to be laid up for a little while, it doesn't so much matter, you know; but if I am to be caged up here for months, and then it is to be the end of all things, I shouldn't like it at all. This has been a jolly world to me, and I find plenty to do in it." And then he went on to speak of the work before him, and the many things he had to complete. As, later, we took a turn or two round the garden together, and he still seemed to have gained strength, I hoped, in spite of his wasted frame and somewhat pinched face, that modern science might save for us for yet a few more years one of the greatest men of his time. But the end has come—too soon for the lovers of his work and himself; too soon, also, in view of what he was still in process of doing, for the world of art and letters; too soon, certainly, for that newer world of

Socialism for which he had worked so hard and had already accomplished so much.

It is not my purpose to speak here at any length of William Morris as a writer and an artist. I doubt whether anyone can judge adequately at present of the value of what he has done. That his poetry and his prose were both exquisite in their kind even critics acknowledge who just now seem to me inclined to belittle him with faint praise. To those of us to whom "The Life and Death of Jason" and "The Earthly Paradise," not to speak of "The Defence of Guenevere," were among the chief literary delights of early manhood, this sort of depreciatory comment appears altogether out of place. After the cold classicism of Tennyson, and the tumble and turmoil of Swinburne's vigorous early poetry, these charming volumes of Morris's came as a sweet and delicious music. If it all seems too easy and too musical, we can only wish that a few of the versifiers we have still with us could be too facile and too tuneful in the same way. The charm which steals over the reader of Morris's verses may well enthrall the lovers of poetry of the next and succeeding generations more than it attracts the hasty critics of our own. It is true that neither in his prose nor in his verse do you find a trace of that genial and almost boisterous humour which frequently broke out in his familiar conversation. And that seems strange; for that he had much that was Chaucerian in his humour, as in his rythm, is beyond all question. The verses which he wrote from time to time for the Socialists are in quite another style. Naturally enough their great merit is overlooked by men who think that his reputation would have been greater if he had died before he became active in the Socialist movement. To such people the "Dream of John Ball"—the *Times* calls it the "Dream of John *Bull*"—is doubtless a weak and ineffective piece of prose! We know better.

As an artist, however, Morris had a greater influence than as a man of letters. That love, appreciation, and accurate reflection of nature and beauty of form which comes out at every turn of his poetry—the twittering of birds, the sighing of the wind among trees, the splendour of the sunshine,

the cool pleasantness of evening, was ever with him, and he couldn't keep still for desire to give expression to that which he felt. What was inartistic and untrue jarred upon him so acutely that he was driven to try and put it right all at once. This accounts for the complete revolution which he brought about—aided by others, it is true, but in great part of his own initiative—this accounts, I say, for the revolution which he wrought not in one but in many departments of art. Furniture, decoration, wall-paper, coloured glass, block-printing, book-printing, tapestry, ironwork, "restoration" of ancient buildings—his influence was greatly felt in all of them, and in some he lived to see complete change in the taste of the educated classes, and even of the public at large. Of such a man as this, with his marvellous versatility and genius in all arts but one, it may be truly said that death is but an incident, and not the most important incident, in his career. His life as expressed in his work is as living to us to-day as when he himself sat chatting and smoking in that lofty room at Hammersmith with the glorious Eastern carpet hanging down on the one side and the equally splendid portraits by Rosetti standing out from the wall on the other.

It was many years after I had enjoyed Morris's poetry, and mocked a little, as ignorant young men will, at his æsthetic armchairs and wall-papers—did he not say himself, "There are no greater fools than those who buy my papers—except those who don't?"—that I met the man himself. What a shock the first meeting was. It was in 1879. I had written some articles on India in the *Nineteenth Century* which had made a little stir, and Mr. Henry Broadhurst invited me to deliver an address on India to a committee of some sort of which Morris was a member, at 19, Buckingham Street, Strand. Morris had been more active than perhaps anybody else against the Turks. I, as it chanced, though having no love for the Turks, had worked hard on the other side against Russia. I imagined him as a refined and delicate gentleman easily overwrought by his sentiments. That was not his appearance in the flesh as we all know. Refinement undoubtedly there was

in the delicate lines of the nose and the beautiful moulding of the forehead. But his hearty voice, his jolly vigorous frame, his easy sailor-like dress—the whole figure gave me a better opinion of the atrocity-mongers, as I considered them, than anything I have seen before or since. Not until the end of 1882 or the beginning of 1883 did I see Morris again. Then the S.D.F. (as the Democratic Federation) was holding a series of meetings on "Practical Remedies for Pressing Needs" in the large hall at Westminster Palace Chambers. The subjects were the now familiar Eight Hours Law, Free Meals for Children, Nationalisation of Railways, and so on. Morris came to the first discussion and forthwith joined the body. It is difficult, perhaps, for men who have come into the movement of late years to understand how we welcomed capable recruits in those days of very small things. True we had with us Helen Taylor, Joynes, Champion, Burrows, Quelch, Williams, James Murray, and other active people; but, even so, we were few and Socialism was new. Morris, with his great reputation and high character, doubled our strength at a stroke, by giving in his adhesion. And how he worked! He was as ready to do anything as the youngest and least known of us. In fact he resented attempts being made to keep him back from doing things which he really ought not to have done. Writing, speaking in and out of doors, conferring, full of zeal and brimming over with good humour and suggestion —it all seems but yesterday. When JUSTICE was started with Edward Carpenter's money, in January, 1884, he threw himself into it with vigour, and wrote frequently. We then thought and said that we should all work on together in harmony to the end. Alas! that was not to be. Happily, however, the differences which arose in the autumn of 1884 were composed, and for many years past the relations of the S.D.F. and all its branches with William Morris, were as cordial as they ever had been before. Again he wrote poems for JUSTICE, again he lectured for our branches and kindly contributed to our funds. He spoke, also, most vigorously and generously in support of our Parliamentary candidates in Burnley and Walworth; and his last appearance on a public platform

was at our New Year's meeting in the Holborn Town Hall in January last. He then met with a reception from the crowded audience so hearty and so enthusiastic that I know, from what he said afterwards, that he felt that his work for the cause was fully understood and appreciated by the men whom he was endeavouring to serve. He was ill at the time, and I fear that even coming to this meeting was an overtasking of his strength. None who were present will ever forget the touching appeal that he then made or the words of counsel and good cheer that he then spoke.

And now we have lost the man whom we all loved and respected—the great poet and artist who devoted his high faculties to the service of the race. William Morris we shall see no more; but the memory of what he was will ever remain with us—sweet as the music of his verse, and encouraging as the hearty welcome with which he never failed to greet his comrades in the cause.

October 6th, 1896. H. M. HYNDMAN.

Reprinted from JUSTICE.

How I Became a Socialist.

By William Morris.

I am asked by the Editor to give some sort of a history of the above conversion, and I feel that it may be of some use to do so, if my readers will look upon me as a type of a certain group of people, but not so easy to do clearly, briefly, and truly. Let me, however, try. But first, I will say what I mean by being a Socialist, since I am told that the word no longer expresses definitely and with certainty what it did ten years ago. Well, what I mean by Socialism is a condition of society in which there should be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master's man, neither idle nor overworked, neither brain-sick brain workers nor heart-sick hand workers, in a word, in which all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully, and with the full consciousness that harm to one would mean harm to all—the realisation at last of the meaning of the word COMMONWEALTH.

Now this view of Socialism, which I hold to-day, and hope to die holding, is what I began with; I had no transitional period, unless you may call such a brief period of political radicalism during which I saw my ideal clear enough, but had no hope of any realisation of it. That came to an end some months before I joined the (then) Democratic Federation, and the meaning of my joining that body was that I had conceived a hope of the realisation of my ideal. If you ask me how much of a hope, or what I thought we Socialists then living and working would accomplish towards it, or when there would be affected any change in the face of society, I must say, I do not know. I can only say that I did not measure my hope, nor the joy that it brought me at the time. For the rest when I took that step I was blankly ignorant of economics; I had never so much as opened Adam Smith, or heard of Ricardo, or of Karl Marx. Oddly enough I *had* read some of Mill,

to wit, those posthumous papers of his (published was it in the *Westminster Review* or the *Fortnightly?*) in which he attacks Socialism in its Fourierist guise. In those papers he put the arguments, as far as they go, clearly and honestly, and the result so far as I was concerned was to convince me that Socialism was a necessary change, and that it was possible to bring it about in our own days. Those papers put the finishing touch to my conversion to Socialism. Well, having joined a Socialist body (for the Federation soon became definitely Socialist), I put some conscience into trying to learn the economical side of Socialism, and even tackled Marx, though I must confess that, whereas I thoroughly enjoyed the historical part of "Capital," I suffered agonies of confusion of the brain over reading the pure economics of that great work. Anyhow, I read what I could, and will hope that some information stuck to me from my reading; but more, I must think, from continuous conversation with such friends as Bax and Hyndman and Scheu, and the brisk course of propaganda meetings which were going on at the time, and in which I took my share. Such finish to what of education in practical Socialism as I am capable of I received afterwards from some of my Anarchist friends, from whom I learned, quite against their intention, that Anarchism was impossible, much as I learned from Mill against *his* intention that Socialism was necessary.

But in thus telling how I fell into *practical* Socialism I have begun, as I perceive, in the middle, for in my position of a well-to-do-man not suffering from the disabilities which oppress a working man at every step, I feel that I might never have been drawn into the practical side of the question if an ideal had not forced me to seek towards it. For politics as politics, *i.e.*, not regarded as a necessary if cumbersome and disgustful means to an end, would never have attracted me, nor when I had become conscious of the wrongs of society as it now is, and the oppression of poor people, could I have ever believed in the possibility of a *partial* setting right of those wrongs. In other words, I could never have been such a fool as to believe in the happy and "respectable" poor.

If, therefore, my ideal forced me to look for practical Socialism, what was it that forced me to conceive of an ideal? Now, here comes in what I said of my being (in this paper) a type of a certain group of mind.

Before the uprising of *modern* Socialism almost all intelligent people either were, or professed themselves to be, quite contented with the civilisation of this century. Again, almost all of these really were thus contented, and saw nothing to do but to perfect the said civilisation by getting rid of a few ridiculous survivals of the barbarous ages. To be short, this was the *Whig* frame of mind, natural to the modern prosperous middle-class men, who, in fact, as far as mechanical progress is concerned, have nothing to ask for, if only Socialism would leave them alone to enjoy their plentiful stye.

But besides these contented ones there were others who were not really contented, but had a vague sentiment of repulsion to the triumph of civilisation, but were coerced into silence by the measureless power of Whiggery. Lastly there were a few who were in open rebellion against the said Whiggery—a few, say two, Carlyle and Ruskin. The latter, before my days of practical Socialism, was my master towards the ideal aforesaid, and, looking backward, I cannot help saying, by the way, how deadly dull the world would have been twenty years ago but for Ruskin! It was through him that I learned to give form to my discontent, which I must say was not by any means vague. Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilisation. What shall I say of it now, when the words are put into my mouth, my hope of its destruction—what shall I say of its supplanting by Socialism?

What shall I say concerning its mastery of, and its waste of mechanical power, its commonwealth so poor, its enemies of the commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organisation—for the misery of life? Its contempt of simple pleasures which every one could enjoy but for its folly? Its eyeless vulgarity which has destroyed art, the one certain solace of labour? All this I felt then as now, but I did not know why it was so. The hope of the past times was

gone, the struggles of mankind for many ages had produced nothing but this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion; the immediate future seemed to me likely to intensify all the present evils by sweeping away the last survivals of the days before the dull squalor of civilisation had settled down on the world. This was a bad look out indeed, and, if I may mention myself as a personality and not as a mere type, especially so to a man of my disposition, careless of metaphysics and religion, as well as of scientific analysis, but with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion for the history of the past of mankind. Think of it! Was it all to end in a counting-house on the top of a cinder heap, with Podsnap's drawing-room in the offing, and a Whig committee dealing out champagne to the rich and margarine to the poor in such convenient proportions as would make all men contented together, though the pleasure of the eyes was gone from the world, and the place of Homer was to be taken by Huxley. Yet believe me, in my heart when I really forced myself to look towards the future, that is what I saw in it, and as far as I could tell scarce any one seemed to think it worth while to struggle against such a consummation of civilisation. So there I was in for a fine pessimistic end of life, if it had not somehow dawned on me, that amidst all this filth of civilisation the seeds of a great change, what we others call Social Revolution, were beginning to germinate. The whole face of things was changed to me by that discovery, and all I had to do then in order to become a Socialist was to hook myself on to the practical movement, which as before said, I have tried to do as well as I could.

To sum up then, the study of history and the love and practice of art forced me into a hatred of the civilisation, which if things were to stop as they are would turn history into inconsequent nonsense, and make art a collection of the curiosities of the past, which would have no serious relation to the life of the present.

But the consciousness of revolution stirring amidst our hateful modern society prevented me, luckier than many others of artistic perceptions, from crystallising into a mere railer against "progress" on the one hand, and on the other

from wasting time and energy in any of the numerous schemes by which the quasi-artistic of the middle-classes hope to make art grow when it has no longer any root, and thus I became a practical Socialist.

A last word or two. Perhaps some of our friends will say, what have we to do with these matters of history and art? We want by means of Social-Democracy to win a decent livelihood, we want in some sort to live and that at once. Surely any one who professes to think that the question of art and cultivation must go before that of the knife and fork (and there are some who do propose that) does not understand what art means, or how that its roots must have a soil of a thriving and unanxious life. Yet it must be remembered that civilisation has reduced the workman to such a skinny and pitiful existence, that he scarcely knows how to frame a desire for any life much better than that which he now endures perforce. It is the province of art to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before him, a life to which the perception and creation of beauty, the enjoyment of real pleasure that is, shall be felt to be as necessary to man as his daily bread, and that no man, and no set of men can be deprived of this except by mere oppression, which should be resisted to the utmost.

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CHANGE OF POSITION—NOT CHANGE OF CONDITION.

To the Socialist, who is earnest in wishing to stimulate the genuine and practical desire of the workers towards freedom, and who knows well that no mere goodnature of individuals can make a system tolerable which is designed for the benefit of the privileged classes only—to the Socialist the aim is not the improvement of condition but *the change in position* of the working classes. For he has full confidence that the change in position must have the immediate consequence of the bettering of condition. I am aware that to many or most of the readers of JUSTICE these remarks will seem trite, yet I think some form of the

thought in them is necessary to be put before people at present. For, to say the truth, if I were a non-Socialist, and were interested in the preservation of the society of privilege, I should conceive a hope from the present situation of the possibility of hoodwinking the working men into accepting what I should name (to them) a kind of semi or demi-semi-Socialism, which would do no sort of harm to the society of privilege. I should condescend to Socialism, and pat it on the back. I should say, as indeed, I have heard such worthies say, "Socialism, my friends, cannot give you what it promises, but I am pleased to see you Socialists, because all this labour agitation will call people's attention to the 'condition of the working classes,' and will 'improve it.' You will find that you must work *with* the capitalists and not *against* them, so that you may extend markets, contend successfully with other nations, and improve business. By that means, though this Socialist agitation is founded on principles which are wrong, and cannot be carried out in practice, yet it will have given you enhanced wages. reduction of the hours of labour, more permanency of employment, better housing, gas and water galore, and an extended franchise. And then (but I don't know when) you will be happy and contented, and, which is more to the point, so shall we."

That, I say, will be the sort of line to take for those who wish to keep labour—*i.e.*, usefulness—out of its heritage. And I think it will be taken, I fear not wholly unsuccessfully. For the present necessities of working people are so great that they must take what they can get, and it is so hard for them in their miserable condition to have any vivid conception of what a life of freedom and equality can give them that they can scarcely, the average of them, turn their hopes to a future which they may never see.

And yet if that future is not to be indefinitely postponed they must repudiate this demi-semi-Socialism. They must say: "£2 a week instead of £1; eight hours work instead of nine, ten, twelve; out-of-door relief galore to supplement the out-of-work periods; comfortable (Lord help us!) lodgings found by the municipality—all these are fine things indeed. But we will not even think of them unless

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we can use them for getting all the benefits which we *know* will follow on the abolition of privilege and the realisation of equality. That is, in short, what we mean to have. What those benefits may be we cannot imagine in detail; but we know that the sum of them will mean a decent self-respecting life for us all. We are Socialists and believe in Socialism, and the day will come when we shall partly be able to estimate our gains by looking back and wondering that we once thought it worth while to strive for such petty advantages as those you have been telling us of."

And again and again it must be said that in this determination we shall be justified when the working-classes make it their determination; and further, for last word, that the first step towards this consummation is the union in one party of all those in the movement who take that view of the movement, and not merely the gas and water and improved trade union view. The view not of improved condition for the workers but of essentially changed position. WILLIAM MORRIS.

Justice, May Day, 1895.

The Promise of May.

Certainly May Day is above all days of the year fitting for the protest of the disinherited against the system of robbery that shuts the door betwixt them and a decent life. The day when the promise of the year reproaches the waste inseparable from the society of inequality, the waste which produces our artificial poverty of civilisation, so much bitterer for those that suffer under it than the natural poverty of the rudest barbarism. For it is undoubtedly true that full blown capitalism makes the richest country in the world as poor as, nay poorer than, the poorest, for the life of by far the greater part of its people.

Are we to sit down placidly under this, hoping that some blessing will drop down from heaven upon us which will bring content and self-respect and a due share of the beauties and joys of the earth to the classes that produce

all that is produced, while it will bring no lessening of the dignity and ease and sweetness of life with which the possessing (and wasting) classes are now endowed?

Most of you will smile at that question, but remember that this opinion was not long ago universally held, and is still held by many.

They think that civilisation will grow so speedily and triumphantly, and production wi'l become so easy and cheap, that the possessing classes will be able to spare more and more from the great heap of wealth to the producing classes, so that at least these latter will have nothing left to wish for, and all will be peace and prosperity. A futile hope indeed! and one which a mere glance at past history will dispel. For we find, as a matter of fact, that when we were scarcely emerging from semi-barbarism, when open violence was common, and privilege need put on no mask before the governed classes, the workers were not worse off than now, but better. In short, not all the discoveries of science, not all the tremendous organisation of the factory and the market will produce true wealth, so long as the end and aim of it all is the production of profit for the privileged classes.

. . . . . .

And I say this is an irresistible instinct on the part of the capitalists, an impulse like hunger, and I believe that it can only be met by another hunger, the hunger for freedom and fair play for all, both people and peoples. Anything less than that the capitalist power will brush aside, but that they cannot; for what will it nean? The most important part of their machinery, the "hands" becoming MEN, and saying, "Now at last we will it; we will produce no more for profit but for *use*, for *happiness*, for LIFE."

Justice, May Day, 1896.

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