CHAPTER VIII

THE RIVER OF FIRE

SPEAKING at a Socialist meeting in Oldham on July 11th, 1885, a notorious agitator declared

"I have lived through and noted the most degrading epoch of public opinion that ever happened in England, and have seen the triumphant rule of the swindler in private and public life, the rule of hypocrisy and so-called respectability, begin to shake and totter "[1]

This agitator, normally reported in the Press as "Mr W Morris" should be distinguished from "William Morris, Author of 'The Earthly Paradise' ", who was still acknowledged in polite society The transformation of the eccentric artist and romantic literary man into the Socialist agitator may be counted among the great conversions of the world In joining the ranks of the revolutionary working class, Morris was not only taking a step of far-reaching significance in his own life, nor was he only bringing the struggling Socialist pioneers their most notable recruit He was also—if he is viewed (as he once viewed himself) as "the type of a certain group of mind" rather than as an isolated individual—taking a step which broke through the narrowing charmed circle of defeatism of bourgeois culture, and which showed the way forward, for all who wished to follow him, for art and for life.

The years when this transformation took place were those between the end of the Eastern Question agitation in 1878 and the early months of 1883 Morris was by no means alone in his time in analysing the disease of capitalist society from their different standpoints Carlyle, Ruskin, Matthew Arnold—even Dante Gabriel Rossetti and John Stuart Mill—either revolted in disgust against the ethic of capitalism or questioned its immutable economic basis Yet all these men, the "railers against 'progress' ", were somehow held back from a final positive and revolutionary

[1] Unpublished Lecture, "The Depression of Trade", Brit Mus Add. MSS 45333

understanding Discussing the death of the old art in a lecture of 1881, Morris declared

"We of the English middle classes are the most powerful body of men that the world has yet seen And yet when we come to look the matter in the face, we cannot fail to see that even for us with all our strength it will be a hard matter to bring about that birth of the new art for between us and that which is to be, if art is not to perish utterly, there is something alive and devouring, something as it were a river of fire that will put all that tries to swim across to a hard proof indeed, and scare from the plunge every soul that is not made fearless by desire of truth and insight of the happy days to come beyond "[1]

What a remarkable insight this is! At the time Morris could do little to define the nature of this "river of fire", and yet he could see around him his most gifted contemporaries—men who had helped to lead him to this point—hesitating upon its brink Rossetti, the inspiration of his youth, died in April, 1882, and Morris reflected upon his lack of interest in politics

"The truth is he cared for nothing but individual and personal matters He would take abundant trouble to help any one person who was in distress of mind or body, but the evils of any mass of people he couldn't bring his mind to bear upon I suppose in short it needs a person of hopeful mind to take disinterested notice of politics, and Rossetti was certainly not hopeful "[2]

If Rossetti was without hope, Arnold (in Morris's view) fell short in another direction—determination and courage It is true that Arnold, in his last years, was carried by his hatred of the philistines to the point of declaring, "Our middle classes know neither man nor the world, they have no light, and can give none", and of appealing directly to the working class to take the remedy into their own hands But in his lecture upon "Equality", which Morris read in the *Fortnightly Review* in 1878, he proposed as a practical programme little more than some reform in the law of bequest—"Self-Help" starting afresh with each generation, the Transport House distant ideal. Morris was impressed by Arnold's sincerity.[3] but not with his conclusions

"With the main part I heartily agree the only thing is that if he has any idea of a remedy he dursn't mention it I think myself that no

[1] "The Prospects of Architecture", *Works*, Vol XXII, p 131
[2] Mackail, II, p 93 [3] May Morris, II, p 69

rose-water will cure us disaster and misfortune of all kinds, I think, will be the only things that will breed a remedy in short, nothing can be done till all rich men are made poor by common consent I suppose he dimly sees this, but is afraid to say it, being, though naturally a courageous man, somewhat infected with the great vice of that cultivated class he was praising so much—cowardice, to wit "[1]

The economist, John Stuart Mill, was also one of those who drew back when he reached the banks of this "river of fire" In his advocacy of women's rights, his agitation for the reform of the Land Laws, he stood among the advanced Radicals of the 1860s and 1870s But when, at the end of his life, his logic led him towards Socialist conclusions, he felt alarm Writing to Joseph Lane (see p 325) in his last years, he discussed the profit-motive and showed that its severe regulation or extinction was incompatible with the functioning of the capitalist economy On the other hand, he concluded, he had no objection "to abolish the law of property 'in its present form' . but it has to be shown if there is any halting-place, short of communism" [2] Morris, in 1882, was convinced that Socialism was *desirable,* although he had hardly yet given his desire that name but he despaired of its practicability. Turning to some of Mill's posthumous papers, he found to his surprise that in the view of an acknowledged leader of orthodox political economy it was less the practicability than the desirability of the change which was in dispute "Those papers put the finishing touches to my conversion to Socialism", he later declared, since they convinced him both that "Socialism was a necessary change, and that it was possible to bring it about in our own days".[3] Mill, in his view, had "clearly given his verdict against the evidence" [4]

As we have seen, even John Ruskin, whom Morris called "the first comer, the inventer",[5] drew back at this "devouring" barrier In truth, Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold—all were too ready to appeal to the working class to lead the nation forth in battles for objectives which they themselves had at heart, which were derived from their own special discontent, but which had little

[1] *Letters,* p 113

[2] Mill to Joseph Lane (n d), Brit Mus Add MSS 46345

[3] "How I Became a Socialist", *Justice,* June 16th, 1894

[4] Note by G B Shaw in E R Pease, *History of the Fabian Society,* p 259

[5] May Morris, II, p 584

relevance to the immediate grievances under which the working class itself was suffering They were too inclined to see the workers as the rank and file of an Army of Light, struggling valiantly for culture or for a new morality, under the generalship of themselves and a few enlightened leaders who had broken free from the philistine middle class It was, indeed, a great thing for Arnold and Ruskin to realize that in their fight for culture and human morality they must turn for aid to the workers, as the least corrupted, most hopeful, element in their society But it was another thing to expect the workers to fight the battles for culture and refinement before they had fought those for bread and health

Morris also fell into this error in the years between 1878 and 1880 At the same time as he was beginning to write and lecture for "Anti-Scrape", he started on a new series of lectures in which he sought to take the cause of art to the workers Discussing "The Lesser Arts" in his first lecture in December, 1877, he put the case at its simplest The flood of "cheap and nasty" products on the market was the fault of all classes of society, he declared, producers and consumers alike In particular—

"the manufacturers (so called) are so set on carrying out competition to its utmost, competition of cheapness, not of excellence, that they meet the bargain-hunters half way, and cheerfully furnish them with nasty wares at the cheap rate "

The remedy must therefore lie with the producers,

"the handicraftsmen, who are not ignorant of these things like the public, and who have no call to be greedy and isolated like the manufacturers or middlemen, the duty and honour of educating the public lies with them, and they have in them the seeds of order and organization which make that duty easier "[1]

Moreover, all his researches into Gothic architecture and into the decorative arts reinforced his conviction that the true roots of these arts were in the traditional skills of the people "History", he said in one of his most striking phrases, "has remembered the kings and warriors, because they destroyed, Art has remembered the people, because they created "[2] What was more natural than that he should turn to the people for the rebirth of art? The only hope for the arts lay in a future when the working class,

[1] "The Lesser Arts", *Works*, Vol XXII, p 22 [2] *Ibid*, p 32

"the 'residuum' of modern civilization, the terror of radical politicians, and the tool of reactionists, will become the great mass of orderly thinking people, sweet and fair in its manners, and noble in its aspirations, and that is the sole hope of worthy, living, enduring art nothing else, I say, will help "[1]

His first lecture was delivered for a body called the "Trades Guild of Learning", promoted by Professor Warr, a Positivist colleague of Marx's old Radical friend, Professor Beesly, and for some years Secretary of the Cobden Club George Wardle, the Manager of the Firm, recalled (in a letter to Sir Sidney Cockerell) that Warr established the Guild with Morris's aid because he "had visions of moralizing the Capitalist" by means of educating the young carpenters, stonemasons, and apprentices In the beginning, for Morris as well,

"it was rather a question of educating the workman, more especially the artizan or worker in some of the fine arts I need hardly say there were very few workmen of any kind there [at the first lectures], except the men from Queen Square [the Firm] and that the bulk of the audience was formed by Morris's *clients* "[2]

Here, then, was Morris, in 1879 and 1880, even as late as 1881, standing on the brink of the "river of fire", hesitating before the plunge Of the real lives and aspirations of the workers he knew very little He knew and respected the craftsmen who worked for the Firm, and the villagers of Kelmscott. but he saw the sordid scenes of the Metropolis as an outsider glimpsing a garish interior of vice

"Look you", he said in 1881, "as I sit at work at home, which is at Hammersmith,[3] close to the river, I often hear go past the window some of that ruffianism of which a good deal has been said in the papers of late As I hear the yells and shrieks and all the degradation cast on the glorious tongue of Shakespeare and Milton, as I see the brutal reckless faces and figures go past me, it rouses recklessness and brutality in me also, and fierce wrath takes possession of me, till I remember, as I hope I mostly do, that it was my good luck only of being born respectable and rich that has put me on this side of the window among

[1] From a pre-Socialist Lecture (1880), reprinted in part in May Morris, II, p 68

[2] *Ibid*, p 605

[3] Morris moved to Kelmscott House, Hammersmith (not to be confused with Kelmscott Manor in Lechlade) in 1878 It was Kelmscott House which became famous as a Socialist meeting-place

delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty street, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings What words can say what all that means?"[1]

"Then indeed I fall a-wondering at the strange and slender thread of circumstance which has armed me for doing and forebearing with that refinement which I didn't make myself, but was born into That, I say, I wonder at "[2]

As far as this point he had gone in the company of several of his gifted contemporaries Beyond that point—he must go alone The courage and insight necessary for further advance he drew from several sources—his experiences with the Firm, his study of the history of the arts, his rich moral response to life, and his practical experience of Radical politics

By the early 1880s it is clear that Morris was disappointed in the great ambitions with which he had started the Firm In order to understand this, it must be remembered that in its origin the Firm had appeared to him not as a commercial venture and scarcely even as a strictly artistic one It was the form taken by his "holy crusade against the age" it was intended to fight the flood of philistinism in one field of Victorian life, to inject into the very sources of production pleasurable and creative labour, to re-create conditions of artistic production found in medieval times But the age had not flinched in the face of this form of attack The slums grew, and the respectable suburban jerry-building thrived

"I think you will understand me but too well when I ask you to remember the pang of dismay that comes on us when we revisit some spot of country which has been specially sympathetic to us in times past but where now as we turn the corner of the road or crown the hill's brow we can see first the inevitable blue slate roof, and then the blotched mud-coloured stucco, or ill-built wall of ill-made bricks of the new buildings, then as we come nearer and see the arid and pretentious little gardens, and cast-iron horrors of railings, and miseries of squalid out-houses breaking through the sweet meadows and abundant hedgerows ."[3]

It might have been something if the age had ignored the Firm altogether, or fought it tooth and nail But, instead, it had been

[1] "Art and the Beauty of the Earth", *Works*, Vol XXII, p 171

[2] Address to Nottingham Kyrle Society, 1881, May Morris, I, pp 201–2

[3] "The Prospects of Architecture", *Works*, Vol XXII, p. 125

absorbed by fashionable and wealthy circles [1] Lady Tranmore's house, in Mrs Humphrey Ward's novel, *The Marriage of William Ashe*, is described as reflecting "the rising worship of Morris and Burne-Jones"

"Her walls were covered with the well-known pomegranate or jessamine or sunflower patterns, her hangings were of a mystic greenish blue, her pictures were drawn either from the Italian primitives or their modern followers "[2]

Moreover, Morris was enraged to find commercial manufacturers turning out cheap imitation-Morris products, including one wall-paper which he described as "a mangy gherkin on a horse-dung ground" [3] "Morris" was becoming the code-word for a kind of ostentatious cultivation among a fringe of the upper and middle classes, and the designer himself was beginning to regard his own customers with increasing distaste.

From its early days the Firm had held fast to certain principles in its work its first Manager, Warrington Taylor, had (unbeknown to Morris) once lost a good contract for decorating a church because he had written on the estimate, under the item "To providing a silk and gold altar cloth" ·

"*Note* —In consideration of the fact that the above item is a wholly unnecessary and inexcusable extravagance at a time when thousands of poor people in this so-called Christian country are in want of food—additional charge to that set forth above, ten pounds "[4]

When Morris started the Anti-Scrape he turned down all orders for decorations or stained glass in old churches, in order not to appear to be profiting from restoration himself In the decoration of private houses he felt even more constrained Philip Webb had built one of his most ambitious houses for Sir Lowthian Bell, the ironmaster, and Morris, called in to do the decoration, was so well pleased with his friend's building that

[1] See "The Lesser Arts" (1877) "People say to me often enough If you want to make your art succeed and flourish, you must make it the fashion a phrase which I confess annoys me, for they mean by it that I should spend one day over my work to two days in trying to convince rich, and supposed influential people, that they care very much for what they really do not care in the least, so that it may happen according to the proverb *Bell-wether took the leap, and we all went over*" (*Works*, Vol XXII, p 13)

[2] See also Mary Howitt, *An Autobiography* (1889), Vol II, p 170

[3] Mackail, II, p 97. [4] Glasier, *op cit*, p 56

he decided to attend to the work in person One day, Sir Lowthian Bell related,

"he heard Morris talking and walking about in an excited way, and went to inquire if anything was wrong 'He turned on me like a wild animal—"It is only that I spend my life in ministering to the swinish luxury of the rich" ' "[1]

As we have seen, Morris was writing in 1883 to Andreas Scheu of his realization that "a reform in art which is founded on individualism must perish with the individuals who have set it going" (see p 127) Certainly this realization came in the early 1880s, when a quite definite difference can be seen in Morris's attitude to his work. Although he was still "in a whirlwind of dyeing and weaving", and enjoyed the work as much as before, yet he no longer held any hope that the example of the Firm would effect any change in the manner of work in Victorian society

In January, 1882, he was writing to "Georgie" Burne-Jones

"I have perhaps rather more than enough of work to do, and am dwelling somewhat low down in the valley of humiliation It sometimes seems to me as if my lot was a strange one you see, I work pretty hard, and on the whole very cheerfully, not altogether I hope for mere pudding, still less for praise, and while I work I have the cause always in mind, and yet I know that the cause for which I specially work is doomed to fail, at least in seeming, I mean that art must go under, where or how ever it may come up again It does sometimes seem to me a strange thing indeed that a man should be driven to work with energy and even with pleasure and enthusiasm at work which he knows will serve no end but amusing himself, am I doing nothing but make-believe then, something like Louis XVI's lock-making?"[2]

In his designing, he was, in general, coming to favour simplicity rather than richness of finish and when he came to lecture upon the lesser arts—in such a lecture as "Making the Best of It"—he was continually striving to translate his principles into terms of a working-class income Fine carving, costly carpets and hangings, rich painting—all these might be desirable. but they were not the most important thing Shoddy must be driven out first. "Simplicity of life, begetting simplicity of taste . is of all matters most necessary for the birth of the new and better art", he said in his first lecture. It was a constant theme of those that followed "Simplicity of life", he said in 1881,

[1] Lethaby, *op cit*, p 94 [2] *Letters*, p 157

"is not a misery, but the very foundation of refinement a sanded floor and white-washed walls, and the green trees and flowery meads and living waters outside, or a grimy place amid the smoke with a regiment of housemaids always working to smear the dirt together so that it may be unnoticed, which, think you, is the most refined? "[1]

Even the richness of the future seemed to him to be more one of quality than of abundance

"In looking forward towards any utopia of the arts, I do not conceive to myself of there being a very great quantity of art of any kind, certainly not of ornament, apart from the purely intellectual arts, and even those must not swallow up too much of life Looking forward from out of the farrago of rubbish with which we are now surrounded, [I can] chiefly see possible negative virtues in the externals of our household goods, can see them never shabby, pretentious, or ungenerous, natural and reasonable always, beautiful also, but more because they are natural and reasonable, than because we have set about to make them beautiful "[2]

"I decorate modern houses for people", he told the young Yeats,

"but the house that would please me would be some great room where one talked to one's friends in one corner, and ate in another, and slept in another, and worked in another "[3]

And to his Socialist friend, Scheu, who must often have exchanged with him anecdotes of the trade, he said

"I would like to be able to make a good fitting boot or a good suit of clothes, not always only those things that are the toys of rich folk As things stand at the moment, I hang along with my creative work on to the apron-strings of the idle privileged classes "[4]

Of Morris's general theories of art and society, as developed in his lectures during these years, there is some discussion in the last part of this book (see p 761 f) But they cannot be passed over here, without some comment upon their vital role in bringing him to his Socialist convictions "Morris's writings about Socialism", Shaw wrote, "really called up all his mental reserves for the first time "[5] This is profoundly true and among these

[1] "The Prospects of Architecture", *Works*, Vol XXII, p 150

[2] "Textile Fabrics", *Ibid*, p 294 [3] *Fortnightly Review*, March, 1903.

[4] Andreas Scheu, *Umsturzkeime* [Seeds of Revolution] (?1920), Part III, Ch VI

[5] May Morris, II, p xxxvi

writings the pre-Socialist lectures on art must be included In preparing these lectures—writing them out in a beautiful hand with only an occasional abbreviation or correction—Morris was exercising and disciplining his mind in a way he had never done before Nothing would be more mistaken than to suppose that the lectures were casually undertaken or easily prepared, from some fund of understanding which existed within him and had only to be tapped. Apart from those delivered to a general audience in support of the funds of the Anti-Scrape, Morris carefully selected his audience, going to the men practically engaged in artistic production, design or craftsmanship In the lectures it is possible to see his thought advancing step by step—the discovery of one conclusion, the forced-march forward to the next In 1880 he referred to the preparation of a lecture for the "Trades Guild of Learning" as his "autumn work" Of another lecture promised to the London Institute for the following March he wrote in the same letter

> "I will be as serious as I can over them the subject still seems to me the most serious one that a man can think of, for 'tis no less than the chances of a calm, dignified, and therefore happy life for the mass of mankind "[1]

"I know what I want to say, but the cursed words go to water between my fingers", he wrote of another lecture. A lecture delivered early in 1881 took him the whole month of February to prepare, including—his journal suggests—eight complete days, while of another lecture he wrote "'tis to be a short one, but will give me a fortnight's work, I know" [2] And even after a lecture's delivery his mind was flooded with fresh problems, or he was left puzzled and bewildered

> "My audience was polite & attentive, but I fear they were sorely puzzled at what I said, as might well be, since if they acted on it Nottingham trade would come to an end "[3]

In all his lectures he was moved—as in his addresses to the Anti-Scrape—by his increasing understanding of the movement of history, of the fact of class division and the class struggle. If simplicity was the aim, its attainment would liberate rich and

[1] *Letters*, p 134 [2] Brit Mus Add MSS 45407, 45339.
[3] *Letters*, p 148

poor alike More and more penetrating became his indictment of capitalism

"A state of things that produces vices among low people, will produce, not opposing virtues among high people, but corresponding vices, if you weave a pattern on a piece of cloth, and then turn it over and look at the back of it, you will see the back of the pattern, and not another pattern material riches bred by material poverty and slavery produce scorn, cynicism and despair "[1]

And again

"Luxury cannot exist without slavery of some kind or other, and its abolition will be blessed by the freeing both of the slaves and of their masters "[2]

Or the uncompromising declaration of his first lecture of all

"Sirs, I believe that art has such sympathy with cheerful freedom, open-heartedness and reality, so much she sickens under selfishness and luxury, that she will not live thus isolated and exclusive I will go further than this and say that on such terms I do not wish her to live I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few

"No, rather than art should live this poor thin life among a few exceptional men, despising those beneath them for an ignorance for which they themselves are responsible, for a brutality that they will not struggle with,—rather than this, I would that the world should indeed sweep away all art for awhile rather than the wheat should rot in the miser's granary, I would that the earth had it, that it might yet have a chance to quicken in the dark "[3]

In truth, these lectures are less concerned with a close criticism of the arts than with a criticism of civilization itself, as measured in the perspective of history, and as revealed by the evidence of contemporary public art. The danger, he said in one lecture, is that—

"the present course of civilization will destroy the beauty of life—these are hard words, and I wish I could mend them, but I cannot, while I speak what I believe to be the truth "[4]

And in another

"Civilization has let one wrong and tyranny grow and swell into

[1] May Morris, II, p 66

[2] "The Art of the People", *Works*, Vol XXII, p 48

[3] "The Lesser Arts", *Ibid*, p 25 [4] "The Beauty of Life", *Ibid*, p 53

this, that a few have no work to do, and are therefore unhappy, the many have degrading work to do, and are therefore unhappy. . Of all countries ours is the most masterful, the most remorseless, in pushing forward this blind civilization For our parts, we think that the remedy is to be found in the simplification of life, and the curbing of luxury and the desires for tyranny and mastery that it gives birth to "

If this cannot be done, the alternative must be—

"the rending asunder for a time of all society by the forces of greediness and self-seeking, by the strife of man against man, nation against nation, class against class "[1]

This strife of class against class he felt still to be something only destructive—and yet still to be preferred to the gradual extinction of all art and noble aspirations in bourgeois vulgarity If "civilization" meant no more than the attainment of comforts for the middle class, he said in 1880, then "Farewell my hope!"

"I had thought that civilization meant the attainment of peace and order and freedom, of goodwill between man and man, of the love of truth and the hatred of injustice, a life free from craven fear, but full of incident that was what I thought it meant, not more stuffed chairs and more cushions, and more carpets and gas, and more dainty meat and drink—and therewithal more and sharper differences between class and class "[2]

If this was all that was meant by "a civilization that is too apt to boast in after-dinner speeches, too apt to thrust her blessings on far-off peoples at the cannon's mouth",[3] then—

"I for one wish we had never gone so far rather than we should never be other than we are, I would we had all together been shepherds among the hills and valleys, men with little knowledge, but desiring much, rough men if you please but not brutal, with some sort of art among them, genuine at least and spontaneous, men who could be moved by poetry and story, working hard yet not without leisure neither malicious nor over soft-hearted, well pleased to live and ready to die—in short, men, free and equal

"No, it cannot be it has long passed over, and civilization goes forward, swiftly, if unsteadily "[4]

[1] Brit Mus Add MSS 45331

[2] "The Beauty of Life", *Works,* Vol XXII, p 76

[3] "Art and the Beauty of the Earth", *Ibid*, p 170

[4] May Morris, II, p 70

And he declared, in a passage from another lecture of 1880 which anticipates his full Socialist criticism of society

"If civilization is to go no further than this, it had better not have gone so far if it does not aim at getting rid of this misery and giving some share in the happiness and dignity of life to *all* the people that it has created it is simply an organized injustice, a mere instrument for oppression, so much the worse than that which has gone before it, as its pretensions are higher, its slavery subtler, its mastery harder to overthrow, because supported by such a dense mass of commonplace well-being and comfort "[1]

"It is strange indeed", he said in 1881,

"it is woeful, it is scarcely comprehensible, if we come to think of it as men, and not as machines, that, after all the progress of civilization, it should be so easy for a little official talk, a few lines on a sheet of paper, to set a terrible engine to work, which without any trouble on our part will slay us ten thousand men and it lies light enough on the conscience of *all* of us, while, if it is a question of striking a blow at grievous and crushing evils which lie at our own doors not only is there no national machinery for dealing with them but any hint that such a thing may be possible is received with laughter or with terror, or with severe and heavy blame The rights of property, the necessities of morality, the interests of religion—these are the sacramental words of cowardice that silence us!"[2]

"If we think of it as *men*"—here is another of those words, like "hope", which came to have such a profound meaning for Morris It is here, in his steadfast refusal to admit that men were mere victims of circumstances of their own creating, that the influence of the Norse sagas and their "worship of courage" can be most strongly felt. "You may think", he said at the end of 1881, that we are "mere straws" in the "resistless flood" "But don't let us strain a metaphor, for we are no straws, but men, with each one of us a will and aspirations, and with duties to fulfill " *Action*—this is the constant theme of his lectures In 1880 he was writing to "Georgie" Burne-Jones.

"I do most earnestly desire that something more startling could be done than mere constant private grumbling and occasional public speaking to lift the standard of revolt against the sordidness which people are so stupid as to think necessary "[3]

[1] "The Beauty of Life", *Works*, Vol XXII, p 65

[2] "The Prospects of Architecture", *Ibid*, p 137 [3] *Letters*, p 139

Educational ventures, campaigns for the enforcement of the Smoke Act, societies like the Commons Preservation and Kyrle Societies which were doing something to prevent the worst desecrations of town and countryside, to all these he was ready to give his public support. But his analysis of society was far too profound to suppose for a moment that these efforts would do more than scratch the surface In August, 1881, he wrote again to "Georgie", who seems to have suggested that he should be satisfied with such limited forms of action.

"I don't agree with you in condemning grumbling against follies and ills that oppress the world, even among friends, for you see it is but now and then that one has a chance of speaking about the thing in public, and meantime one's heart is hot with it, and some expression of it is like to quicken the flame even in those one loves and respects most, and it is good to feel the air laden with the coming storm even as we go about our daily work or while away time in light matters To do nothing but grumble and not to act—that is throwing away one's life but I don't think that words on our cause that we have at heart do nothing but wound the air, even when spoken among friends 'tis at worst like the music to which men go to battle "[1]

Here, in his lectures, then, Morris was continually reconnoitring the banks of the "river of fire", arousing his courage and that of his friends, gaining an ever sharper vision of the degradation of the present and the hope of the future. "When he spoke off-hand", one of his contemporaries recalled,

"he had a knack at times of hammering away at his point until he had said exactly what he wanted to say in exactly the words he wished to use, rocking to and fro the while from one foot to the other "[2]

The lectures were the anvil on which he beat out his thought. "I am in rather a discouraged mood", he wrote at the New Year, 1880,

"and the whole thing seems almost too tangled to see through and too heavy to move Happily, though, I am not bound either to see through it or move it but a very little way. meantime I do know what I love and what I hate, and believe that neither the love nor the hatred are matters of accident or whim "[3]

As he struggled to organize his love and his hatred, so patterns

[1] *Letters*, p 151 [2] Mackail, II, p 7 [3] *Ibid*, II, p 23

began to emerge both in his own thinking and in his understanding of the society he examined The years between 1880 and 1883 are ones in which his mood varied often between hope and depression On the one hand, he felt the gathering of the storm, that he was no longer isolated and that people were beginning to move in the same way "it is a real joy to find the game afoot, that the thing is stirring in other people's minds besides mine", he wrote in 1881.[1] In one of the most penetrating passages of his very first lecture, he had sensed that the movement of ideas and their influence in history was more than a mere accident of individual discontent

"I suppose that if some half-dozen men at any time earnestly set their hearts on something coming about which is not discordant with nature, it will come to pass one day or other because it is not by accident that an idea comes into the heads of a few, rather they are pushed on, and forced to speak or act by something stirring in the heart of the world "[2]

On the other hand, he felt often enough powerless in the face of the unbroken capitalist façade In the summer of 1882, with trouble at home, colonial wars abroad, a famine in Iceland, he wrote to "Georgie" Burne-Jones

"Indeed I am older, and the year is evil, the summerless season, and famine and war, and the folly of peoples come back again, as it were, and the more and more obvious death of art before it rises again, are heavy matters to a small creature like me, who cannot choose but think about them, and can mend them scarce a whit "[3]

Here, indeed, he might have remained, had his work for Anti-Scrape, his lectures and practice of the arts, been his only line of advance However revolutionary his theoretical insight into the problems that most concerned him, he was likely to fall in the mire of hopelessness or nostalgia if he did not have practical confidence in the possibility of overthrowing capitalism, practical contact with the working-class This was the point at which Morris broke so decisively with both Ruskin and Arnold. "To do nothing but grumble and not to act—that is throwing away one's life " Once his mind was decided, he always looked for the most likely form of action that was at hand to realize his desires

[1] Mackail, II, p 24 [2] "The Lesser Arts", *Works*, Vol XXII, p 13
[3] *Letters*, pp 160–1

From the time that the Eastern Question agitation had come to its sorry end, Morris had maintained his links with the radical movement of the London workers Moreover, at one point after another in his lectures he found his theoretical conclusions converging with the aims of political action "I cannot forget", he said in 1879,

"that it is not possible to dissociate art from morality, politics, and religion Truth in these great matters of principle is of one, and it is only in formal treatises that it can be split up diversely "[1]

In his first lecture, at the end of 1877, he had put forward the great principle which contained in its kernel all others

"I hope that we shall have leisure from war—war commercial, as well as war of the bullet and the bayonet leisure above all from the greed of money, and the craving from that overwhelming distinction that money now brings I believe that as we have even now partly achieved LIBERTY, so we shall one day achieve EQUALITY, which, and which only, means FRATERNITY "[2]

On New Year's Day, 1881, he wrote

"My mind is very full of the great change which I hope is slowly coming over the world [I write] a word of hope for the new year, that it may do a good turn of work toward the abasement of the rich and the raising up of the poor, which is of all things most to be longed for, till people can at last rub out from their dictionaries altogether these dreadful words rich and poor "[3]

It was the effort to translate these principles into practical political terms which brought him into contact with the Socialist movement and the class which alone could enforce the "great change".

It was resistance to imperialism, in the first place, which kept Morris active in Radical circles It is true that the break-up of the E Q A did not leave him in a hopeful frame of mind Jingoism, it appeared to him, had swept the country

"The peace-party are in a very small minority *there is no doubt of it* . For some years to come, until perhaps great disasters teach us better, we shall be a reactionary and Tory nation I believe myself that the best way would be for all worthy men to abstain from politics for a

[1] "The Art of the People", *Works,* Vol XXII, p 47
[2] "The Lesser Arts", *Ibid* , p 26 [3] *Letters,* p 143

while, so that these fools might be the sooner filled with the fruit of their own devices "[1]

But this "leave-them-to-stew-in-their-own-juice" attitude was little more than the new enthusiast making faces when he meets with his first check, and Morris was quickly shocked out of it by the events of the next year Imperialism was continuing its brutal advance, from the Fiji Islands to Burma, from South Africa to the Mediterranean At the end of 1878 Disraeli and his military advisers took advantage of the Jingo spirit and the anti-Russian phobia to set to work to "rectify" the North-West Frontier of India, which (Disraeli explained) was a "haphazard and not a scientific one" The campaign thus launched in Afghanistan dragged on for several years, through disastrous set-backs and inglorious "victories" The miners' M P , Thomas Burt, made one of his best speeches in the House at its outset [2] The Government over-reached itself in 1879, with this war, the annexation of the Transvaal, wars against the Kaffirs and—least popular of all—against the Zulus Had these wars been successful, no doubt the wave of Jingoism might have carried Disraeli back to power in the General Election which took place in the first months of 1880 But all were indeterminate, brutal, and expensive and the rising disgust of the British workers, which Gladstone echoed in the rolling phrases of his "Mid-Lothian" campaigns, helped to bring a Liberal administration into power

Imperialism, Morris saw, was the inevitable and most vicious outcome of the "Century of Commerce" He denounced it both in artistic and political terms "While we are met here in Birmingham", he said at the beginning of 1879,

"to further the spread of education in art, Englishmen in India are actively destroying the very sources of that education—jewellery, metal-work, pottery, calico-printing, brocade-weaving, carpet-making—all the famous and historical arts of the great peninsula have been thrust aside for the advantage of any paltry scrap of so-called commerce "[3]

At the end of January, 1880, in a lecture which was probably

[1] *Letters*, p 120

[2] See *Thomas Burt an Autobiography* (1924), p 52 Frederick Harrison and other Positivists organized a Committee to oppose the Afghan War, and Morris attended one of its meetings

[3] "The Art of the People", *Works*, Vol XXII, p 36

designed for some working-class Radical Club in connection with the election campaign, and which was devoted to combating "the tribe of Jingoes", and the slogan "Our country Right or Wrong" blazoned upon their banners, he declared

"England's place—what is England's place? To carry civilization through the world? Yes, indeed, the world must be civilized, and I doubt not that England will have a large share in bringing about that civilization

"And yet, since I have heard of wine with no grape-juice in it, and cotton-cloth that is mostly barytes, and silk that is two-thirds somach, and knives whose edges break or turn up if you try to cut anything harder than butter with them, and many another triumph of Commerce in these days, I begin to doubt if civilization itself may not be sometimes so much adulterated as scarcely to be worth the carrying—anyhow it cannot be worth much, when it is necessary to kill a man in order to make him accept it . . "

As an artist, as a craftsman, as a citizen, as a poet—in all his feelings he was revolted by these wars

"Perhaps some of us had got into our heads the idea that this folly was of late years so much abated among ourselves, that it would scarcely do more in our time than help after-dinner oratory to a few stock phrases we know better now we have found these phrases of little meaning turn into actions that have shamed us all without rebuke from the British nation We have allowed ourselves to be gulled by wretched travesties of justice, and I am ashamed to say it, seldom more grossly than in the luckless year we have just passed through "[1]

Moreover, he was now relating imperialism abroad much more directly with political events at home Looking back on the Eastern Question he described it as being, in part, "an attempt to amuse the people with dramatic events abroad, while the drag is being put on democracy at home", while of the Afghan war he roundly declared "if ever war was waged for war's sake, that has been—that democracy might be checked in England"

At the time when he delivered this lecture Morris was in that transitional period which he came later to describe as "a brief period of political radicalism during which I saw my ideal clear enough, but had no hope of any realization of it" [2] In the

[1] Brit Mus Add MSS 45334 Some extracts from the lecture are in May Morris, II, pp 53–62

[2] "How I Became a Socialist", *Justice*, June 16th, 1894

autumn of 1879 he became Treasurer of the National Liberal League, a small and largely ineffective organization which strove to keep together what influence the Labour Representation League still held when the latter petered out towards the end of 1878. Its first Secretary was Henry Broadhurst, Morris's old colleague of the "Workmen's Neutrality Committee" and also Secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C. To the Parliamentary Committee now fell the main responsibility for the promotion of working-men candidatures within the patronage of the Liberal Party and the N L L seems to have been mainly designed by its promoters, Broadhurst and its Chairman, George Howell (ex-Secretary of the L R L), as a means of uniting the London Radical Clubs and trade unions, together with some middle-class men, behind certain specific and short-term democratic reforms Its first important campaign came in the election of 1880, when it helped to rouse the London working class behind Gladstone's platform of "Peace, Retrenchment, Reform" Morris, still under the spell of Gladstone's oratory, worked as a loyal electioneer in the campaign [1] It is true that he could not refrain from suggesting objectives both more far-reaching and more precise

"I think of a country where every man has work enough to do, and no one has too much where no man has to work himself stupid in order to be just able to live where on the contrary it will be easy for a man to live if he will but work, impossible if he will not . where every man's work would be pleasant to himself and helpful to his neighbour, and then his leisure (of which he ought to have plenty) would be thoughtful and rational . "[2]

But these views, he said, were only personal "crochetts"

"I understand clearly that my crochett has no chance of being heard till Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform are abroad I intend at the coming election to vote for any good man and true who will help me to those, and to let my crochett bide its time, and any others of you who are like me, crochetteers, I give the advice to do the same "[3]

The formation of Gladstone's ministry put the promoters of

[1] Morris campaigned enthusiastically for Sir Charles Dilke, with the help of Burne-Jones and William De Morgan See A M W Stirling, *William De Morgan and his Wife* (1922), p 114 f

[2] May Morris, II, p 60 [3] Brit Mus Add MSS 45334

the League in a quandary "We have now to consider the possibility of making the League a force if that be not possible, better dissolve at once", Howell wrote to Broadhurst on April 26th, 1880 [1] Broadhurst had little reason to continue his interest in the League The honest stonemason had suffered the disaster of being elected to Parliament himself, and, exposed to the patronizing flattery of the bourgeoisie for the representative of the "British working man", his feet were set on the road which led to his total surrender at Sandringham in 1884, where the Prince of Wales even went so far as to accompany him to the village pub on the royal estate

"The Prince invited me to partake of the refreshment of the house, and I was quite ready to comply We had, I think, a glass of ale each and sat down in the club-room, where we found several farm labourers enjoying their half-pints and their pipes No excitement, no disturbance, no uncomfortable feeling, was evinced by those present The beer was very good and of a homely and acceptable flavour. I left Sandringham with a feeling of one who had spent a week-end with an old chum of his own rank in society rather than one who had been entertained by the Heir-Apparent and his Princess "[2]

No wonder Morris was to write in a letter of this year (when lamenting the lack of real working-class leaders to make conscious the "vague discontent and spirit of revenge" of the workers)

"But you see when a man has gifts for that kind of thing he finds himself tending to rise out of his class before he has begun to think of class politics as a matter of principle, and too often he is just simply 'got at' by the governing classes, not formally but by circumstances "[3]

However, John Hales took Broadhurst's place as Secretary, and it was agreed that it was desirable "in the interests of the Liberal party generally and of the principles of Liberalism specially" that the League should continue and extend its work Morris wrote to Broadhurst congratulating him on his election, and adding "How to broaden and deepen the stream of radical principle, keeping meanwhile the government both alive and steady, without harrassing or frightening it,—that is the question, I fancy "[4] A programme of reforms was drawn up, including

[1] Howell Collection, Bishopsgate Institute

[2] Broadhurst, *op cit*, pp 151–3 [3] May Morris, II, p 72

[4] Morris to Broadhurst, April 4th, 1880, Brit Lib Polit Science

demands for detailed electoral reform and shorter parliaments, the abolition of paid canvassing, the codification of electoral law, a (vague) demand for reform of the Land Laws, the long-standing demand for municipal government for London, and —added in April, 1881, as a result of the hostility of the Tory Lords to certain of Gladstone's policies—the replacement of the House of Lords by an Elective Chamber [1] "Unsatisfactory", Morris noted in his journal for March 26th, 1881, after attending a meeting of the League [2] Reluctantly he was coming to admit his own disillusion in the Liberal Government and in any movement which attached itself to its tail The momentum of imperialism was not checked in the least by the new administration the only apparent result was the introduction of a certain indecisiveness into colonial policy, which led to further set-backs and inglorious defeats Gladstone, his former idol, was still not overthrown he pictured him as sincere and progressive but enchained by his more reactionary colleagues "Politics Not pleasant", he wrote in February, 1881

"I don't trust the present government to show as radical,—Whig it is and will remain I doubt the Liberal Majority in the house, and the Government may get timid In that case Gladstone's influence will be so shaken that the Liberal Party will fall to pieces, and good men and true must set to work to build up a Radical Party out of them and make themselves leaders out of the stones of the streets for all I can see But Gladstone is much stronger in the country than I thought for, and if he could only stop these damned little wars he might stop in till he has carried the regular liberal programme, and we should make a good step forward But little wars with defeats and inglorious victories shake a Government terribly "[3]

A few days later he was even more anxious The war was dragging on in Afghanistan "I do think our side ought to start putting a little pressure on Government to make them do what they doubtless want to do what a pity it is that there is not a proper radical club properly organized for political purposes, who could act speedily in such junctures "[4] Less than a month later affairs in the Transvaal shook Morris's confidence in Gladstone himself. During his second Midlothian campaign he had treated

[1] Handbill in Howell Collection [2] Brit Mus Add MSS 45407

[3] May Morris, II, p 581 [4] *Letters*, p 144

Disraeli's annexation with his intensest moral indignation

> "If Cyprus and the Transvaal were as valuable as they are valueless, I would repudiate them because they are obtained by means dishonourable to the character of the country"

Reminded of these words now that he was in power, he explained that he had used the word "repudiate" in the sense of "dislike". Grievous as his moral revulsion might be, he could not see his way to letting them regain their independence—although the defeat inflicted by the Boers on the British troops at Majuba Hill brought morality and practice a little closer together. "I am in hopes the matter will be taken up somewhat by people outside parliament for inside it all or nearly all people seem to be behaving ill enough", wrote Morris [1]

Perhaps it was owing to Morris's persistence that among the objects of the National Liberal League there was added, at the end of 1881, the demand for the application to foreign policy of the "same moral principles" as in private relations Otherwise, the programme of the League showed little advance on the previous year, except in its emphasis on the need for extensive reform in the laws regarding Land Tenure—a question very much in the air in Radical circles (see p 326) "It is surely a disgrace", ran the Address of the League, dated January 20th, 1882,

> "that extensive tracts of land in the most fruitful counties of England should be falling out of cultivation because feudal superstitions have brought the relations of landlord and tenant to a deadlock In Scotland whole counties have been depopulated to form deer forests, while in England the food and shelter of vermin are made of more account than the daily bread and cottages of labourers" [2]

These certainly were crying injustices—but it is noticeable that the Address does not take up with equal vigour any of the grievances of the industrial working class Although this document bears, among others, William Morris's signature, it is doubtful whether he was still the League's Treasurer at the time of publication, since it was at about this time that he resigned, declaring "I do so hate—this in spite of my accounts—everything vague in

[1] *Letters*, p 146 [2] Handbill in Howell Collection

politics as well as in art "[1] Shortly after his resignation the League disappeared from public view [2]

Much of Morris's work for the E.Q.A. and the N.L.L., then, brought him education only in a negative sense. The work of the former, Wardle recalled, introduced him "to some politicians he had not known personally before, but acquaintance did not increase any respect he may have had for them" [3] A. J. Mundella, now on the Government Front Bench, produced in the mind of one Gladstonian Radical M.P. the impression that "he was more cunning than candid",[4] certainly, Morris had little to do with him after the death of the E.Q.A. His relations with the "Lib.-Lab." working-class leaders were even more important in the development of his political views. It has sometimes been suggested that his uncompromising opposition to the old trade unionism and to parliamentarianism, during his leadership of the Socialist League, was more a matter of doctrinaire opinion or of temperament than of political experience. In fact, in his association with the N.L.L. he was brought into contact with the leading figures of the "Lib.-Lab." tradition. George Howell, the patient wire-puller, can never have commanded much of his respect. Even among his colleagues he gained influence rather through his unremitting secretarial work than through his advocacy of principle. One group of Radicals

[1] Mackail, II, p. 8.

[2] References in Morris's journal for 1881, and elsewhere, suggest that in 1881 and 1882 he was involved in one other attempt to bring into a "Radical Union" the working-class political clubs of London. The Firm's manager, George Wardle, recalled that "he hoped to organize a strong political party out of the radical elements or out of the trades-unions". Out of concern for the Firm's affairs, Wardle felt obliged "to discourage Morris from talking politics all day, which he gladly would have done, at that time" (May Morris, II, pp. 603, 605). Describing this abortive attempt in a letter to Scheu in September, 1883, Morris said: "I joined a committee (of which Mr. Herbert Burrows [later an active propagandist for the S.D.F.] was Secretary) which tried to stir up some opposition to the course the Liberal Government and Party were taking in the early days of this parliament, but it speedily fell to pieces, having in fact no sort of practical principles to hold it together, I mention this to show that I was on the look out for joining any body which seemed likely to push forward matters" (*Letters*, p. 188).

[3] May Morris, II, p. 604.

[4] L. A. Atherley-Jones, *Looking Back: Reminiscences of a Political Career* (1925), p. 44.

distrusted him so far as to publish an article on the eve-of-poll when he was contesting Stafford in 1881, containing the words

"It may be safely asserted that with him self-interest is the strongest motive for action, and progress a mere secondary consideration Mr George Howell has never worked for or been identified with any reform movement where money was scarce and hard work the only reward "[1]

Henry Broadhurst was a man of more sincerity, but a typical product of a skilled craft union in a time of industrial peace Throughout his years as a working stonemason he was never involved in any serious strike or dispute, except for one at the end of his working career, when he acted rather as a peace-maker between employers and workers than as strike leader The strike had been, in fact, anticipated by a lock-out and Broadhurst recalled complacently in his reminiscences

"Rarely, I suppose, in the history of Labour disputes was a lock-out conducted on a more amicable basis No breaches of the law occurred, and so quiet was everything that scarcely anyone save those interested in it was aware of its existence "[2]

As a leader of his union he had demanded the use of arbitration, even when his own members on strike refused to accept his advice Morris had ample opportunity to observe the stages by which Broadhurst became a mere pawn of Mundella and his colleagues, and it is not difficult to see—behind such passages as this one in a lecture of 1883—not doctrinaire opinion but the weight of Morris's own personal experience "The Trade Unions, founded for the advancement of the working class as a class, have already become conservative and obstructive bodies, wielded by the middle-class politicians for party purposes."[3]

By 1882 his disillusion in the Liberal Party was almost complete He wrote, of a bye-election, to the Hon George Howard (Earl of Carlisle to be), amateur artist, Liberal M P , and colleague of his on the E Q.A.

"I suppose your election is the North Riding I make the unpolitical remarks that I hope you have got a good candidate 'tis better to be beaten with a good one than be successful with a bad one I guess

[1] F W Soutter, *Recollections of a Labour Pioneer* (1924), p 120

[2] Broadhurst, *op cit* , p 31

[3] "Art Under Plutocracy", *Works*, Vol XXIII, p 188

there will be a fine procession of rats before this parliament is over that will teach us, I hope, not to run the worst man possible on all occasions Excuse the spleen of a kind of Radical cobbler "[1]

What finally opened Morris's eyes to the impossibility of advance within the shadow of the Liberal Party was the policy of the Government in Ireland and Egypt The introduction of the infamous Coercion Bill in 1881 had aroused Morris's anxiety, but he had softened his fears with the reflection that they "don't *intend* to use it tyrannically" [2] In fact, the Minister responsible for its operation, Forster—who had spoken so nobly on the platform of the E.Q A five years before—when faced by the growing struggle of the Irish people for national independence employed his powers so tyrannically that even a section of the Conservatives thought his actions injudicious In Egypt the Liberal measures of "pacification" in the summer of 1882 included the shelling of Alexandria by British warships This made the lesson complete. The Coercion Bill, the worship of Liberal "leaders" who " 'led' the party into mere Jingoism", the "Stockjobber's Egyptian War, quite destroyed any hope I might have had of any good being done by alliance with the Radical party" [3] "Radicalism", he wrote in June of the next year, "will never develop into anything more than Radicalism It is made for and by the middle classes, and will always be under the control of rich capitalists they will have no objection to its political development, if they think they can stop it there but as to real social changes, they will not allow them "[4]

The last of his illusions had perished under the criticism of practical experience No barrier remained in his mind to prevent his acceptance of Socialist conclusions But changes as great as this cannot be accomplished without the severest tensions at even the most intimate levels of a man's life As early as the end of 1879 he was lamenting the seeming drying-up of the sources of his creative writing

"As to poetry, I don't know, and I don't know The verse would come easy enough if I had only a subject which would fill my heart and mind but to write verse for the sake of writing is a crime in a man of my years and experience "[5]

[1] *Letters*, p 156 [2] *Ibid*, p 144 [3] *Ibid*, pp 176, 188
[4] *Ibid*, p 173. [5] *Ibid* p 132

The great intellectual effort of his lectures must have exposed to him the facility of much of his verse At the same period there are unexplained passages in his letters to "Georgie" Burne-Jones which suggest the breaking apart of old and intimate ties In October, 1879, he wrote from Kelmscott

> "I am sitting in the tapestry-room, the moon rising red through the east-wind haze, and a cow lowing over the fields I have been feeling chastened by many thoughts, and the beauty and quietness of the surroundings, which latter, as I hinted, I am, as it were, beginning to take leave of That leave-taking will, I confess, seem a long step towards saying good-night to the world "[1]

His estrangement from his wife seems to have become more pronounced Indeed, the sense of his personal isolation during these critical years is extreme He was turning his back upon his own class, and this meant that he was facing the separation from many old friends and colleagues It was only the growing sense of "the Cause" which sustained his courage "Little by little it must come, I know", he said in 1879

> "Patience and prudence must not be lacking to us, but courage still less Let us be a Gideon's band 'Whosoever is fearful and afraid, let him return, and depart early from Mount Gilead' And among that band let there be no delusions, let the last encouraging lie have been told, the last after-dinner humbug spoken "[2]

"Every man who has a cause at heart", he said in 1881, "is bound to act as if it depended on him alone, however well he may know his own unworthiness, and thus is action brought to birth from mere opinion "[3]

In the summer of 1882, then, he was ready "to join any body who distinctly called themselves Socialists",[4] although for a few months his action was delayed by the breakdown of his daughter, Jenny's, health,[5] his practical endeavours to relieve a famine in Iceland, and also his distrust of the ex-Tory leader of the Democratic Federation, H. M. Hyndman (see p 340 f) He had almost no acquaintance with individual Socialists, no knowledge of the theory of Socialism In the summer of 1881 he

[1] *Letters* [2] "Making the Best of it", *Works*, Vol XXII, p 117

[3] *Ibid*, p 174 [4] "How I Became a Socialist", *Justice*, June 16th, 1894

[5] According to Mackail, Jenny's breakdown completely shattered Morris for several months see Mackail, II, p 73

had been enraged by the Liberal Government's prosecution of Johann Most, the German anarchist editor of the paper *Freiheit*, published from London, which had printed an article extolling the assassins of Tsar Alexander II

"I suppose you have seen the sentence on Herr Most just think of the mixture of tyranny and hypocrisy with which the world is governed! These are the sort of things that make thinking people so sick at heart that they are driven from all interest in politics save revolutionary politics which I must say seems like to be my case Indeed I have long known, or felt, say, that society in spite of its modern smoothness was founded on injustice and kept together by cowardice and tyranny, but the hope in me has been that matters would mend gradually, till the last struggle, which must needs be mingled with violence and madness, would be so short as scarcely to count "[1]

Very possibly Morris's sympathy was aroused by the work of the *Freiheit* Defence Committee (see p 329), in which a leading part was taken by the first pioneers of modern Socialism in England but there is no evidence that he established any contact with it As for theoretical knowledge, when he took the step of joining the Democratic Federation, he later wrote "I was blankly ignorant of economics, I had never so much as opened Adam Smith, or heard of Ricardo, or of Karl Marx."[2] In 1882 he read Henry George's *Progress and Poverty* (see p 338) and Wallace's *Land Nationalisation*[3] and something of Robert Owen and the French Utopian Socialists and also—it is evident from the many references—he was reading a good deal of William Cobbett, who seems to have had a pronounced influence upon the forthright polemical style of his later Socialist writings In the winter of 1882-3 he attended a series of meetings at the Westminster Palace Chambers, organized by the Democratic Federation, on the subject of "stepping-stones" to Socialism The Austrian refugee Andreas Scheu, a furniture designer by trade, recalled Morris's first attendance

"One evening the meeting had scarcely started when Robert Banner, the book-binder, who sat behind me, passed me a note 'The third

[1] *Letters*, p 149

[2] "How I Became a Socialist", *Justice*, June 16th, 1894

[3] Morris to his daughter Jenny, November 13th, 1882, refers to Wallace's *Land Nationalisation* "not nearly such a good book as George's but there are some nice things to remember in it", Brit Mus Add MSS 45339

man to your right is William Morris' I had never seen Morris before, and looked at once in his direction The fine, highly intelligent face of the man, his earnestness, the half-searching, half-dreamy look of his eyes, his plain unfashionable dress, made a deep sympathetic impression on me "[1]

On January 13th, 1883, he joined the Federation In the same week he was made an Honorary Fellow of Exeter College, Oxford. His membership card for the Federation, countersigned by H H Champion, was simply inscribed, "William Morris, Designer"

The next few months were the true months of conversion In one of his earliest Socialist lectures he spoke of that feeling of joy,

"when at last, after many a struggle with incongruous hindrances, our own chosen work has lain before us disentangled from all encumbrances and unrealities, and we have felt that nothing could withhold us, not even ourselves, from doing the work we were born to do, and that we were men and worthy of life "[2]

This joy was now his own

"And now the streets seem gay and the high stars glittering bright,
And for me, I sing amongst them, for my heart is full and light
I see the deeds to be done and the day to come on the earth,
And riches vanished away and sorrow turned to mirth,
I see the city squalor and the country stupor gone
And we a part of it all
In the days to come of the pleasure, in the days that are of the fight—
I was born once long ago I am born again to-night"

He plunged at once into the day-by-day round of activities

"When I joined the Communist folk, I did what in me lay
To learn the grounds of their faith I read day after day
Whatever books I could handle, and heard about and about
What talk was going amongst them, and I burned up doubt after doubt,
Until it befel at last that to others I needs must speak "[3]

On February 22nd, a friend noted in his diary. "He was bubbling over with Karl Marx, whom he had just begun to read in French He praised Robert Owen immensely "[4] In March he delivered a

[1] Scheu, *op cit* Scheu gave a similiar account to Mackail, II, pp 95-6
[2] "The Lesser Arts of Life", *Works*, Vol XXII, p 269
[3] *The Pilgrims of Hope*, Section VI [4] Mackail, II, p 97

lecture in Manchester so trenchant as to bring down the wrath of the leader-writers upon him But nothing was more appropriate in his whole life than that one of his first public announcements that he was "one of the people called Socialists" was made with the "first comer", Professor Ruskin, in the chair At the close of his address, in the Hall of University College, Oxford, Morris turned his appeal to the middle class

"I have a last word or two to say in begging them to renounce their class pretensions and cast in their lot with the working men It may be that some of them are kept from actively furthering the cause which they believe in by that dread of organization which is very common in England more common among highly cultivated people, and most common in our ancient universities Since I am a member of a Socialist propaganda I earnestly beg those of you who agree with me to help us actively, with your time and your talents if you can, but if not, at least with your money, as you can Do not hold aloof from us, since you agree with us, because we have not attained that delicacy of manners which the long oppression of competitive commerce has crushed out of us "[1]

The reactions of the academic Podsnaps was immediate Ruskin they might fear, but could still tolerate among them. Morris, by identifying himself with the working class, had overstepped the mark. "At the close of his address", *The Times* reported the next day,

"Mr Morris announced himself a member of a socialistic society and appealed for funds for the objects of the society The Master of University then said to the effect that if he had announced this beforehand it was probable that the loan of the College-hall would have been refused "

Morris had crossed the "river of fire" And the campaign to silence him had begun

What was the "river of fire", the something "alive and devouring", but the class division within society? Morris's conversion was a true conversion It was not sudden, unannounced, a bolt out of the blue It was in every sense a qualitative change in understanding and in action, for which all his life—and the lives of many others who had influenced him, from Sir Thomas More to Carlyle, from Shelley to Ruskin—had prepared the way In a certain sense he had already in his lectures advanced

[1] "Art Under Plutocracy", *Works*, Vol XXIII, p 191

the theory of Socialism in relation to the decorative arts beyond any point which any other theorist had yet reached But the final understanding was lacking The understanding of the class struggle, submerged in many of his lectures, was only made apparent on his reading of *Capital*, in his discussions with Scheu and Bax and Hyndman, and his first Socialist activities Once made apparent, all his previous thought came into unity, his action acquired new purpose and direction One of his earliest Socialist lectures, in which he makes acknowledgement to Marx, shows clearly how all his old pre-occupations—his resistance to imperialism, his work for the National Liberal League—fell suddenly into place

"Once again I tell you that our present system is not so much a confusion as a tyranny one and all of us in some way or other we are drilled to the service of Commercial War, if our individual aspirations or capacities do not fit in with it, so much the worse for them the iron service of the capitalist will not bear the loss, the individual must, everything must give way to this, nothing can be done if a profit cannot be made of it it is for this that we are overworked, are made to fear starvation, live in hovels, are herded . into foul places called towns it is for this that we let half Scotland be depopulated and turn its stout peasants and herdsmen into mere flunkies of idle fools it is for this that we let our money, our name, our power, be used to drag off poor wretches from our pinched fields and our dreadful slums, to kill and be killed in a cause they know nothing of"

Imperialism he saw no longer as the outcome of ambitious statesmen and generals "It is simply the agony of capitalism driven by a force it cannot resist to seek for new and ever new markets at any price and any risk" England is losing her favoured position in the world.

"What is to be done? Conquer new markets from day to day, flatter and cajole the men of our colonies to consider themselves what they are not, Englishmen responsible for every quarrel England may lead them into conquer valiant barbarians all over the world rifle them rum them missionary them into subjection, then train them into soldiers for civilization"

And so to the most uncompromising paragraph of all

"Here are two classes, face to face with each other No man can exist in society and be neutral, no-body can be a mere looker on one camp or another you have got to join you must either be a reactionary and be crushed by the progress of the race, and help it that way

or you must join in the march of progress, trample down all opposition, and help it that way "[1]

Here was Morris's greatest discovery—the discovery which his friends, for all their genius, could not make Marx helped him to make it, but once it was made he accepted it as the inevitable conclusion of all his past thought In its discovery he found his way forward both as an artist and as a man His old dream of healing the division between the artist and the people now became a vision to look forward to with certainty. that time when—

"the man of the most refined occupation, student, artist, physician shall be able to speak to him who does the roughest labour in a tongue that they both know, and to find no intricacy of his mind misunderstood "[2]

The finest aspirations of the romantic revolt, which aroused his own desires for "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" in his youth, now seemed possible of fulfilment.

"Not in Utopia, subterranean fields,
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!
But in the very world, which is the world
Of all of us "

Blake's Jerusalem might yet be built in earnest, and Shelley's Phantoms and Sages be given flesh and blood The long romantic breach between aspiration and action was healed

So it was that William Morris crossed the "river of fire" "How can we of the middle classes, we the capitalists, and our hangers-on", help the workers? he asked in January, 1884. His answer was decisive

"By renouncing our class, and on all occasions when antagonism rises up between the classes casting in our lot with the victims There is no other way and this way, I tell you plainly, will in the long run give us plenty of occasion for self-sacrifice "[3]

Of his old friends, only Philip Webb and Charlie Faulkner, both of whom fully knew his greatness, went with him. It was "the only time when I failed Morris", said Edward—soon to be Sir

[1] Unpublished lecture, "Commercial War", Brit Mus Add MSS 45333
[2] Speech to the Kyrle Society, May Morris, I, p 195
[3] "Art and Socialism", *Works*, Vol XXIII, p 213

Edward—Burne-Jones many years later[1] Swinburne, when Morris tried to enlist his aid, gave only his "sympathy".

"I do trust you will not regard me as a dilettante democrat if I say that I would rather not join any Federation What good I can do to the cause will I think be done as well or better from an independent point of action and of view "

His years of revolt had ended in breakdown, and he was now the "prisoner of Putney", beginning his thirty years of genteel retirement with the solicitor, Theodore Watts-Dunton Ruskin watched with encouragement from the further bank He had had one mental crisis already, and he knew his powers to be failing

"It is better that you should be in a cleft stick than make one out of me—especially as my timbers are enough shivered already In old British battles the ships that had no shot in their rigging didn't ask the disabled ones to help them "[3]

But Morris was finding new friends and comrades on every side He was in his fiftieth year, but he looked to the future with the excitement of youth. In an allegorical poem, "The Three Seekers", he exorcised for the first time the old despair, the fear of death, the restless fret of his middle years and, in its singing refrain, we hear the joy of his "new birth"

" 'There is no pain on earth,' she said,
'Since I have drawn thee from the dead '

"Laughing, 'The world's my home,' she said,
'Now I have drawn thee from the dead '

"Now life is little, and death is nought,
Since all is found that erst I sought "[4]

[1] *Memorials*, II, p 97
[2] Brit Mus Add MSS 45345
[3] *Ibid*
[4] *To-Day*, January, 1884