

Nine

They have hopes that they are not conscious of

The voyage to Ems brought no reconciliation. While Rossetti remained in limbo, caught in the contradictory roles of family counselor and lover-in-the-wings, Janey patiently waited, drinking and bathing in the waters that were of course no cure for her sickness. After two months abroad, she finally realized that her husband preferred re-discovering love in the dreamland of poetry to loving her. By the end of August she was ready to come home. Husband and wife returned to London with nothing changed, but each with a view to giving new shape to the future.

Morris came to grips with the chronic matter of money. Taylor was particularly concerned that Morris's habit of writing checks for himself against the Firm's account whenever he was short of funds would wreck the business. He wrote to Webb on 12 July 1869, a few days before the Morrises left for Ems,

I think a stern warning from you, that the firm must be respected when the last £200 is devoured, that its property is sacred, would have some effect upon WM. It will make him think about what is to be done. The sooner he devours his £200 the better – things must then come to a crisis – the firm has served him well – his capital has all along returned him 5 and 6 per cent and is now paid back to him – and he has a nice steady little business – to knock it down would be the utmost folly. [Taylor Papers]

Taylor, like the partners of the firm, was fully aware of Morris's

marital problems and more informed than the rest about his finances. He wrote to Webb again in August,

About WM's own private money affairs, I am very anxious. I think he has a most trying time coming – his only chance is regularly paying his weekly bills now that the mines pay badly as well as irregularly. It is for him a bad situation. The books bring in money at uncertain times – it comes like a 'tip' to a school boy – and is of no real benefit – I only trust he won't come to grief under his trial – since I have been ill during the last 18 months an unsteadiness has grown up – bad – and this causes me anxiety. [Taylor Papers]

Morris acknowledged his financial difficulties to Webb while asking him to advance him sixty pounds against the prospect of running out of funds in Germany. He wanted Webb to know that he was not upset over Taylor's constant reminders. He wrote in a letter on 20 August,

I hope, he don't think I am seriously vexed at any thing he has said, or otherwise than very much obliged by his friendliness; I think I understand the whole matter perfectly well; and know there is a great deal of reason in what he says, though he is not at present quite master of the details. [Morris Letters, I, 92]

Toward the end of their stay in Ems, Rossetti suggested that Morris should take Janey to Switzerland, but as Morris pointed out to Webb, there were a number of reasons, including the lack of money, why they should return home instead.

Sometime during the last six months of his life, Taylor helped Morris pull together a responsible budget. In 1868 he had estimated that Morris was spending from £1,000 to £1,100 a year, an amount that was rapidly depleting his resources. Taylor figured that Morris received about £460 from dividends from the shares that he had inherited from his father in the Devon Great Consolidated Copper Mining Company, down by half from the £900 per year he received when he came of age in 1855. In 1874 the copper company ceased paying dividends altogether.

Taylor calculated that Morris also obtained about £200 a year from

the sale of his books and another £200 from his salary as manager of the Firm. The roughly £200 shortfall – the difference between his spending (£1060) and his income (£860) – came from drawing down cash that Morris had invested in the Firm. In October 1868, Morris had £400 left to claim; by August 1869 the amount was down to £200.

Morris took the problem seriously. He began making lists of annual expenditures that totaled half of what he had spent in 1868. In March 1870, the month after Taylor died, he persuaded the other members of the Firm to increase his salary by fifty pounds, assume the cost of the rent, taxes, gas and coal at Queen Square and give him a ten per cent share of the Firm's net income. In 1871 he added another £100 to his income by becoming a director of the rapidly declining copper mining company.

While Morris and Janey were abroad, Rossetti asked and received official permission to open Lizzie's grave to obtain the manuscript poems that, in a state of grief, he had placed in her casket. He especially wanted to retrieve his long poem called "Jenny." He intended to merge the early poems with the poems that he had written during the past twelve months inspired by Janey. Aside from the similarity in names, the Janey poems and "Jenny" expressed Rossetti's deep sympathy for the vulnerable woman under duress. His book of poetry, entitled *Poems*, appeared in April 1870. Morris joined Swinburne and others in writing favorable reviews for the major periodicals.

Privately, to his new admirer Aglaia Coronio, Morris expressed his distaste: "I have done my review, just this moment – ugh!" [Morris Letters, I, 116].

Janey, after returning to England, finally accepted her husband's estrangement and she now began for the first time to see Rossetti alone. Their visits were not joyous nor particularly secretive but cloaked in sadness. Rossetti wrote to her in a note in January 1870,

The sight of you going down the dark steps to the cab all alone, has plagued me ever since – I hope you got home safe and well. Now everything will be dark for me till I can see you again.[DGR-JM Letters, 33].

In early April, before *Poems* appeared, Janey accepted an invitation to stay at Scalands, the home of Barbara Bodichon, in Sussex. Mrs.

Bodichon, who was a founder of Girton College, Cambridge and a leading advocate of women's rights, also invited Rossetti. Janey and Rossetti were together at Scalands for much of April and May.

On April 26 Morris wrote Janey a seemingly cordial note:

I scarcely dared hope you would get so much better. On Sunday I did a good days work at the Venusberg and sat up till 3 ½ last night writing it all out; I think I may finish this last part this week, but then I have to rewrite a good deal of the earlier part. [Morris Letters, I, 117]

The Venusberg referred to "The Hill of Venus," the last tale that Morris wrote for the final volume of *The Earthly Paradise*. It is unlikely that Janey missed the layers of irony in her husband's communication. Writing on the day of their wedding anniversary, he is delighted that she suddenly feels well, out of his sight and in the company of Rossetti, allowing him, undisturbed at home, to stay up all night to complete his imaginary exploration of the mound of Venus. In the tale, Walter, a German knight despairing of life, finds refuge in a dark, overgrown cavern in the hillside. Within, he discovers Venus, beautiful, naked and direct. She approaches with hands held out, "her blood throbbing as his throbbed through her bosom sweet" [Morris, VI, 294].

Sometime between 1869 and 1871, Morris started a novel in a contemporary setting that he eventually abandoned. (The manuscript is written throughout on paper watermarked 1869, but Mackail indicates that it was written in 1871.) In the story he tackled the problem that now nagged him deeply. The major character, Parson Risley, has grown angry and unhappy because he has married a woman other than the one he loved. Morris gives the story a dramatic turn when he has the wife discover a letter that her husband wrote to his true love years before.

In the letter, the Parson describes how he came up to London to confess that he was going to marry another woman, but lost his nerve. In an extraordinary gush of words he reveals that his resolve was overpowered by infatuation. He tells his sweetheart that

when you took me upstairs to see your newly furnished bedroom, and were so pretty over talking about all the things, and showed me your dear clothes in the drawers and I saw your

little slippers lying about, and all the dear things that touch your body that I love so, then my heart failed me as I thought I should never be with you in the new pretty bed, and I came away with the kisses that I feel now.

He simply couldn't tell her in person that he was to be married next Thursday. Confused and distraught he says the most preposterous things. "Who knows," he continues in the letter, "– we may meet again – my wife may die before we are either of us very old." He asks for pity, forgiveness, understanding, love and reunion:

You know dear that life won't be very pleasant to me, so don't be too angry: at all events be sure that I don't love her: ugh! . . . oh my God if I were only back with you to give and be forgiven over and over again how can I do it how can I do it? To live and pretend to love this ugly stupid woman, bad-hearted too she is – when I have had the cleverest and most beautiful woman in the world in my arms. [Morris Papers]

Morris sent the manuscript of this nascent novel to Georgie Burne-Jones to see if she would give him any encouragement. She gave him none.

Janey Morris understood how her husband felt towards her. Did she also know his feelings for his sister? In the last months of 1870, while Morris finished the final revisions to the fourth and last volume of *The Earthly Paradise*, Janey stayed several weeks with Morris's mother and his sisters Henrietta and Emma in Torquay. On 25 November, Morris wrote to her to say that the last volume would be published in time for the holidays. He asked her to tell his sister that he would have a nice surprise for her. The sentence is incomplete but revealing:

Tell Emmie I shall have a Christmas present for her which I hope may tend in some degree toward counteracting a youth spent in – ah! – Have the kids written? [Morris Letters, I, 126-7]

What might he have added to finish the sentence? A youth spent in "reading stirring romances together," or "daydreaming about love and heavenly reunion?" We can only guess, but we can be sure that Janey

understood the allusion and its irony. A Christmas gift to his sister of the final volume of *The Earthly Paradise*, with its concluding tale of “The Hill of Venus,” would serve not to “counteract” but rather celebrate and, in a sense, consummate his love.

A week or so later, in another letter to Janey, Morris interrupted himself again. In response to her writing about the pain of unhappiness he countered that sensitive and imaginative people always have hope:

As for living, dear, people like you speak about dont know either what life or death means, except for one or two supreme moments of their lives, when something pierces through the crust of dullness and ignorance, and they act for the time as if they were sensitive people –

For me I don’t think people really want to die because of mental pain, that is if they are imaginative people; they want to live to see the play played out fairly – they have hopes that they are not conscious of –

Hillao! here’s cheerful talk for you – I beg your pardon, dear, with all my heart [Morris Letters, I, 128].

Morris didn’t need to complete the thought. Janey knew what hopes he harbored.