One

He felt the separation keenly

William Morris was born to make his mark on the world. He had all the natural endowments. He was strong, energetic and emotionally alive. He was equipped with the keenest senses and a remarkable imagination. All of these qualities were evident from the very beginning.

Morris said that he could never remember a time when he did not read. At age four he was reading books written for adults, and by seven he had read all the Waverly novels, many books by Marryat and others as well. If true, this was an incredible feat. The Waverly novels of Walter Scott number twenty-nine books and three tales, and Captain Marryat wrote ten adventure stories. Whether Morris read all, or merely some, of these novels, he was a rare, literate child.

His visual sense was particularly vivid. Growing up on the edge of Epping Forest, the once vast medieval stand of royal woods north of London, he developed an appreciation of natural forms and shapes. Morris found the trunks of the hornbeam trees rising in the forest and seen against the mass of the wood behind precise and romantic. In the family library he came across Gerard's *Herbal*, an illustrated dictionary of plants and flowers, which he read again and again. He absorbed the real and artificial images of nature, eventually using them in his designs for wallpapers, tapestries and carpets.

His sense of smell was also acute. Particular odors invariably stimulated memories of early childhood. "To this day," he once said, "when I smell a may-tree I think of going to bed by daylight." He and his

sisters and brothers kept small plots to grow vegetables near the house. Years later the strong sweet smell of balm would bring to mind "very early days in the kitchen-garden" and conjure images of "the large blue plums which grew on the wall beyond the sweet-herb patch" [Mackail, I, 10]. He loved wildlife as well, giving a special place in his affections to birds of all kinds.

Morris was born the eldest son, but third of nine children, on 24 March 1834. His parents, William Morris and Emma Shelton, had grown up as neighbors in the town of Worcester, and their families were intimate with one another and distantly related. William Morris senior joined a firm of discount brokers in London when he was in his early twenties. The company, Harris, Sanderson & Harris, was new and between the Morrises and the founders there was a family connection.

Discount broking was a form of banking in which brokers provided clients cash at a discount in exchange for their agreement to repay the full amount on a fixed date. The business was highly respectable. Brokers who were able to assess the character and financial resources of their clients made a comfortable, even opulent living. Morris's father was good at his work. By the time he was thirty he was a partner in the firm, which had in the meantime simplified its name to Sanderson & Co. Soon after, he moved his young family to a commodious house, Elm House, in Walthamstow, on the outskirts of London. Walthamstow was then a pleasant village in the countryside overlooking the valley of the Lea River. A year later young William Morris was born.

Young William's very first days were inauspicious. He was a sickly infant and "had to be kept alive, his mother used to say, by calves' feet jelly and beef tea" [Mackail, I, 5]. But he soon recovered. When he was six, his father was rich enough to take the lease on Woodford Hall, a stately mansion not far from Elm House. The house was surrounded by its own park and located on the edge of Epping Forest; Palladian in style, it was largely cut off from the life of the outside world. This fostered a sense of insularity and self-sufficiency.

As a child Morris enjoyed outings to neighboring churches to take brass rubbings of medieval knights and clerics. He was greatly pleased when his father gave him (or at least allowed him to have) a small suit of armor, and he wore it while riding his pony around the park. When he

was eight his father took him on a memorable visit to Canterbury to see the cathedral. He was delighted when, in the following year, the Herald's College acknowledged his father's new status as a wealthy gentleman and granted him a coat of arms, featuring three golden horseshoes with a crest of a silver horse's head.

Morris relished everything about his early days, particularly his intimate friendship with his favorite sister Emma. She was the first child, nearly four years older than he. Unlike his second sister Henrietta, Emma was charming, lovable and "specially fond" of her brother [May Morris, II, 613]. Like him she was an avid reader, and so the two spent a great deal of their time reading together. They shared a fascination for medieval romances. Often he read aloud while she listened. Years later, after he died, she remembered reading Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron*,

> together in the rabbit warren at Woodford, poring over the enthralling pages till both were wrought up to a state of mind that made them afraid to cross the park to reach home. [Mackail, I, 8]

No doubt the romance stood out in her memory because two of the main characters are a brother and sister named William and Emma, which were also the names of their father and mother. Morris literally fell in love with his sister as they put their heads together to read.

Until the age of thirteen, Morris's childhood was the sunniest and happiest time of his life. In the autumn of 1847 however, it came to an abrupt close when his father suddenly died. In a story written several years later as a student at Oxford, the young Morris conveyed his sense of grief. The knight Amyot returns home after a long absence only to die suddenly. Walter, his young friend, recalls a poignant moment five years earlier when he and Amyot were separated after a childhood visit to a distant cathedral city, reminiscent of the trip Morris took with his father to Canterbury. "I remember how his hand left mine at last . . . and it was all like a dream that he should leave me, for we had said that we should always be together" [Morris, I, 156]. Walter's fleeting memory is interrupted by bitter reality. He finds himself standing next to Amyot's bed. As his sister leans

forward and kisses him, he realizes that his friend is dead, leaving them very lonely and sad.

Several months after his father's death, Morris's mother sent him to boarding school at Marlborough College. He disliked the school and made few friends. However, he found some consolation reading books on archaeology and church architecture in the library or wandering through the neighboring countryside in search of woods and antiquities. His classmates remembered him as a "strong-looking boy, with a high colour and black curly hair, good-natured and kind, but with a fearful temper." Others recalled his curious habit of nervously kneading his fingers together for which he found an outlet in weaving string nets. "With one end of the net fastened to a desk in the big schoolroom he would work at it for hours together, his fingers moving almost automatically." He invented endless stories about knights and fairies, with which he occasionally amused his schoolmates. He was also remembered as a solitary figure who disliked football and cricket and was "fond of mooning and talking to himself, and considered a little mad by the other boys" [Mackail, I, 17].

He longed for home, though the house he loved had disappeared. His mother had given up the lease on Woodford Hall and moved to a more manageable house, Water House, not too far from Woodford, in November 1848. Still, he looked to home for comfort and waited impatiently for letters from his sister. He wrote to her at the beginning of November,

> I am sure, you must think me a great fool to be always thinking about home always, but I really can't help it I don't think it is my fault for there are such a lot of things I want to do and say, and see.

Months later he still chafed at being sent away. He wrote to her in the spring of 1849,

> I am very sorry I was not home with you at Easter, but of course that was not to be and it is no good either to you or to me to say any *horrid stale arguments* about being obliged to go to school for of course we know all about that.

Next to wishing he were at home he wanted most "to get a *tremendous* long letter from you dear Emma," as he wrote in closing one of his own [Morris Letters, I, 3-8].

Emma turned eighteen the year that her brother entered Marlborough. Three years earlier, a new curate had arrived at the church at Walthamstow where the Morrises attended services. The Reverend Joseph Oldham brought with him an enthusiasm for the Tractarians, a group of Anglican clergymen who included most notably John Henry Newman. The Tractarians wanted to reinvigorate the Church of England by creating, among other things, a sense of beauty through the revival of music and ceremony. In contrast to the evangelical community within the Church, to which the Morrises belonged, this movement was considered either a form of subversion toward Roman Catholicism or a breath of fresh air. The Tractarian (High Church or Oxford) Movement also had taken hold at Marlborough. Morris and his sister shared their appreciation of this return to medieval religious practices. "I am glad you liked the anthem on Easter Tuesday," he wrote from Marlborough. "We here had the same anthem on Monday and Tuesday as on Sunday." He "thought it was very beautiful," especially the third verse which "was sung entirely by base, not very loud but with that kind of emphasis which you would think befitting to such a subject" [Morris Letters I, 6].

While her brother was at Marlborough, Emma fell in love with the curate, and in the spring of 1850 she married him. Morris, now sixteen and apparently unaware of the courtship, was devastated. He felt that he and his sister were inseparable. Shortly after the marriage Oldham was appointed to a church in distant Derbyshire. Morris was "thus put quite out of reach of his favourite sister. He felt the separation keenly; the brother and sister had been closely intimate in all their thoughts and enthusiasms; and it was to some degree under her influence that the Church was settled on as his own destined profession" [Mackail, I, 25].