

Three Steps of the Sun

By A. Forrester

Chapter 1

1877, London, England

I'm late. Oxford Street is crowded with people and carriages and the weather isn't helping matters. After paying the driver, I struggle with my umbrella against the wind and pelting rain, taking shelter behind a group of gentlemen, heads down, holding their hats as they walk. I check the water-stained newspaper in my hand and see the address is now unreadable. As I follow these men, I hear a familiar name: William Morris. They must be going to his speech too.

We come to a dark and shabby building and I immediately regret coming. This is not a place for ladies. I hear my sister's voice in my head, "Be wise about where you go and who sees you." She longs to keep our family respectable, and has always feared I pose a threat to that respectability.

I hear the boom and thunder of men's voices all around me, smell the smoke and step back, to a dark corner where I slide into an empty chair, hoping I won't be seen. My pulse is

racing. I'm aware this was a bad idea, but I can't move. I want to see him. I must see him. I've saved every item in the papers about him, gone to every show of his. William Morris has ideas, not just about how art or craft should be, but about how the world should be. He is bold. Brave. And I want to see him up close, feel the power of his words as they come from his own mouth.

The room is filling up. The voices are getting louder. Still there are no other women. I don't see how I can leave now without drawing attention to my presence. And suddenly, it begins.

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! It's time to get started. Please take your seats."

There is a lowering of voices, the creak of chairs, a clearing of throats and I'm trapped here in the far corner. I'll have to stay where I am for the duration of the speech. I'm seized with guilt. What will I say to my father when I come home after dark, alone? For the life of me, I can't think of an excuse. I didn't really think this through. Yet, here I am. This is really happening. I see him. There, on the stage. It suddenly feels...important that I'm here. Fated somehow. I want this. And I don't have to tell them. For the first time I have a secret from my family. I'm a grown woman of twenty-eight. I don't need anyone's permission to attend a lecture. I attended them all the time at art school, during the day. But really, there's nothing wrong here. I can attend this one too. Though I'm the only woman, no one is making me leave. The earth has not opened up to swallow me. The fact of this secret feels delicious.

The man standing at the podium is wearing spectacles, sweeping his head across the audience, left and right. The room easily holds around five hundred people. A full house. He introduces himself as the President of the Trades Guild and thanks everyone for coming to the lecture series. I sit higher in my seat so I might see William Morris better. He is staring at the floor, arms crossed in front of him with a scowl on his face. His scruffy beard and wild

hair make him look like a bear in a suit—uncomfortable, annoyed, powerful. After he is introduced, he stands to the applause of the room. Once it dies down, he begins.

“The Decorative Arts.” He glances up at the crowd, taking his time. “What is their relation to modern life and progress?” A pause. He is a man of such presence that one is inclined to believe anything that he says. “The decorative arts are a very great industry indeed, comprising the trades of housebuilding, painting, joinery and carpentry, smiths' work, pottery and glassmaking, weaving, and many others: a body of art most important to the public in general, but still more so to us handicraftsmen.”

As his excitement grows, he becomes more animated and I'm drinking in every word, like someone parched with thirst gorging on water. I'm not the only one. Every head is turned toward him, like flowers to the sun, every ear cocked to the tune of William Morris, for he is not only a famous artist, and craftsman, but a very successful businessman.

I've been to his shop on Oxford Street with Choons, helping her pick out wallpaper for her husband's library. There were so many designs—the larkspur, the jasmine, the willow, chrysanthemums, thistles, and vines, all in perfect harmony, striking a fine balance of color and form.

“Now it is one of the chief uses of decoration, the chief part of its alliance with nature, that it must sharpen our dulled senses. The wonders of intricate patterns interwoven, those strange forms invented, that men have so long delighted in, forms and intricacies that do not necessarily imitate nature, but in which the hand of the craftsman is guided to work in the way that she does, till the web, the cup, or the knife, look as natural, nay as lovely, as the green field, the riverbank, or the mountain flint.”

I take my bag and pull out the sketchbook. I still carry it with me, even though I'm no longer a student. It's become a habit. I scribble on the page what he's just said. It feels like he's speaking directly to me.

“The great plague of our time and the biggest threat to the decorative arts is the lying tongue that tries to tell the public it wants ugliness instead of beauty, cheapness instead of fair pay for honest work. When ‘hand-made’ is thrown out in favor of something made by machines or worse—poor craft. We who spend time and effort to achieve beauty are told we are no longer needed, that there is more profit in ugliness.”

He takes a breath and strokes his beard as he allows this remark to sink in. The room is still and tense as if every man here is on the edge of his seat. I turn my head, leaning forward to see their expressions. They are not smiling as they were at the beginning.

“The great question we must ask is how are we to rescue the decorative arts in our time from their decline? Whom must our teachers be? They must be Nature and History. Let us, therefore, study them wisely, be taught by them, kindled by them; all the while determining not to imitate or repeat, to have either no art at all or an art which we have made our own.”

I am writing as I listen. Nature and History. I remember the walks of my childhood with my uncle in the woods of *Aldourie*. My sketchbooks even then were filled with drawings of mushrooms, curled tree bark, beetles, birds, and pinecones. All the patterns in them, the colors, and the unity were all there for me to study. William Morris is right. We must learn from nature. Not just copy other art.

My pencil is scribbling fast. His words like medicine. Healing and true.

“By what means then shall those work who long for reform in the arts, who are eager for possession of beauty, and better still, for the development of the faculty that creates beauty? 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 it, when they do not care about it in the least.

All this so that I can make a little money. But artists have no chance of spending time enough over the arts if they must be pushing fashion this way and that for their advantage.”

There is a stirring in the audience, a murmuring of dissent. But William Morris raises his voice over it.

“Sirs, there is no help to be got by working this way: the only real help for the decorative arts must come from those who work in them; they must lead this fight. You whose hands make those things that should be works of art, you must be all artists and good artists before the public at large can take a real interest in it; and when you have become so, I promise you that you shall lead the fashion; fashion shall follow your hands obediently enough.”

The voices are hostile now. I hear bits and snatches of complaint.

“Who does he think he is?” “...not sound, not sound at all.” ... “He isn’t qualified to speak of these things.”

“... what is called Commerce, should be called greed of money. The crowd who are ridiculously called manufacturers are nothing better than capitalists and salesmen. What can real craftsman do amidst the enormous amount of work turned out every year which professes to be called decorative art? They are hard put to supply the cravings of the public for something new, with no time to supply them something beautiful. The remedy, I repeat, is for the craftsman to work side by side with the artist.”

Now the grumbling is getting louder. There is coughing. Nervous laughter. “Madness!”

“I know what stupendous difficulties, social and economic, there are in the way of this, yet I think that they seem to be greater than they are: and of one thing I am sure, that no real living decorative art is possible if this is impossible. If you are at heart desirous to quicken the arts; if the world will, for the sake of beauty and decency, sacrifice some of the things it is

so busy over--many of which I think are not very worthy of its trouble--art will begin to grow again.”

William Morris looks around the room, which is now humming with comments, picks up his papers and sits down. The speech is over. The room is quiet for an awful moment and then a few claps grow into a hundred of polite ones. Gentlemen spread the magic wand of manners and the voices of criticism disappear. The president steps to the podium, pauses a moment, presumably to think of something positive to say.

“Thank you, Sir, for that stirring speech.” He turns to nod at William Morris, who is staring at the paper in his own hands. He does not respond to the president. He appears quite aware of what people think of him and he does not pretend otherwise. His courage stirs me. He has the countenance of a king, serene in his knowledge of what he does and why he does it. The president asks people to leave the room in an orderly fashion.

The event is over. Everyone stands up, and the volume of voices rises again, but this time the excitement is of the flavor of contention. Fingers prod chests, fists shake in the air. There is talk all right, but not about solutions to the problem of manufactured decorative art. It is of the problem of William Morris. Heretic.

I am standing on tip toe, but can no longer see William Morris. Turning my back on the crowd, I step further into the shadows. I don't want to be seen by them. Certainly not talked to. My mind is swimming with the speech I've just heard. I put my sketchbook back in my bag. It was bold. Truthful. Correct. William Morris is so much more than what has been written about him. The gossip about his wife and Mr. Rossetti takes up all the space in the newspapers. Shameful. Horrid. It must be difficult for him and his family. Yet he continues in his work. He speaks his mind.

When the room finally clears, I see the president by the podium, stiffly shaking the hand of William Morris. He is talking at him, but I see the face of Mr. Morris. It is closed. He

doesn't trust this man. He is moving away from him, finally raising a hand in farewell, and moving down the steps toward the door. He stops when he sees me in the back row and comes closer, shielding his eyes from the overhead light.

I step forward in a sudden act of bravery that I can hardly credit. *What am I doing?*

He turns his head, quizzically. "Hello. Have we met before?" It is only then that I remember I'm a rain-soaked, bedraggled mess.

"Oh. No. I'm sorry. I'm Mary Tytler."

"You're...not a guild member, I trust."

"No, I'm an artist."

He leans back and his face beams like the sun.

"How wonderful!" And what did you think of the speech, Miss Tytler?"

I try my hardest not to make a mess of it. I don't want to blurt out reactions. I want to take my time and be thoughtful.

"I liked it very much. I'd... like to talk with you about it. I have some questions."

"Excellent!" He turns around and watches the president leave. "What a dreary place this is. Let's get out of here, shall we?"

I glance all around. We are alone. And William Morris is inviting me to walk with him. *What will I do?*

William Morris extends his arm toward the door, eyes lingering on my face. He wants to take me somewhere. But where? *I can't be seen alone with him. What would Choons say? My father?* He must understand we can't be alone together, unchaperoned, doesn't he?

And yet...he says nothing more, and I follow him out the door. Once we are on the street, the rain is splashing down on us. He immediately takes off his coat and holds it over both our heads, moving closer to me. Even in the rain, I can smell the musty scent of him—the

tobacco, the pomade on his hair. I don't bother with the umbrella, which is useless anyway. It's much nicer being near him like this, under his arm. *I'm walking with William Morris.*

As we walk, I'm glad the rain obscures us from prying eyes. In a few minutes, we are standing before an elegant shop. The sign on the front window says *Liberty*. There are colorful objects and fabrics on display. He pushes the door open and holds it for me. Swathes of bright materials are laid out on tables. The designs are exotic, intoxicating—the indigo blues, and emerald greens in swirling patterns. While I'm standing there, stunned by the beauty of these fabrics, William Morris walks to the back of the shop, and as I turn, he is shaking hands with a man wearing an apron over his suit. They appear to be old friends, relaxed in each other's company. William Morris leans in to say something I can't hear, and the man smiles and nods, glancing over at me. What is he saying? Should I run out of here so I'm not seen by him? Does it matter so much what this shop keeper thinks?

When William Morris comes back, he offers to take my coat and puts it next to the fire with his own.

“Arthur said to make ourselves at home. The rain has driven his customers away today. He's going to bring some tea for us and a couple of chairs.”

“That's very kind of him.”

I am relieved we won't be alone. This man will be our chaperone. There is nothing to worry about. The fire is warm and inviting. It's a perfect place to talk.

Arthur Liberty has a white beard which is trimmed neatly and a barrel-shaped body. Bringing two dark wooden chairs with intricate carvings, he sets them by the fireplace where our coats are drying.

“What a nasty day out there, eh? You're best out of it.”

“Thank you, Arthur, for your kind hospitality. Allow me to present Miss Mary Tytler, an artist.”

“Charmed,” His eyebrows waggle up and down. “And where did you go to school if I may ask?”

“I’ve recently graduated from the Slade School of Art.”

Arthur Liberty and William Morris grin at one another.

“Very impressive, Miss Tytler. Very impressive indeed.”

“You mean for a woman?” says William, stroking his beard and making mischief.

“I mean, for *anybody*.”

I like Mr. Liberty.

“Thank you.” I make a little bow. “Is this your shop, Sir?”

“It is indeed.”

“It’s beautiful. These chairs are so unique. I’ve never seen any like them before.”

“Yes, they are lovely, aren’t they? They’re Swiss. From the countryside. Handmade, of course, by a farmer who lives in the mountains near Baden.”

I cast my eyes around the room.

“The fabrics you have here are exquisite. Everywhere I look I see something of interest.”

His smile is warm and genuine.

“You have a good eye, Miss Tytler. You recognize excellent design when you see it. I try to bring these things from all over the world to London, for those with discerning taste.”

“Just what I was talking about over at the Trades Guild. We should all be promoting the *real* decorative arts in any way we can.”

“And did they like what you had to say?” Mr. Liberty turns his head, eyes glowing with mischief as he folds his fingers across his belly.

William Morris grins. “Oh, I think they liked that part. It was the bit about having artists lead the way that wasn’t so popular.”

Mr. Liberty smirks behind his beard.

“I imagine it wasn’t. But at least you gave them something to think about, William. You always do.”

“Perhaps.”

“Now, you two relax right here, and I’ll bring you some tea.” And with that, he disappears to a back room somewhere.

“What a charming man.”

“Yes— a businessman, through and through. Charming and intelligent. He has a nose for what’s popular, but I like him anyway, despite myself.”

I smile at his sense of humor.

As we sit there by the fire, I’m starting to get warm and comfortable, forgetting everything I was going to say about his speech.

“So, what did you do this morning?” he asks, changing the subject entirely.

I blink, trying to think back that far. This morning seems like weeks ago.

“I was at the British Museum.”

“Ahhhh. And what treasures did you find there?”

“I’m still working my way through the Asian collection and am amazed at the variety of the designs.”

“And what do you make of their fascinating written language?”

“I suppose in some ways it’s like the Egyptian hieroglyphs. A sort of picture writing.”

We talk for a while about the influence of England’s trade with China and Japan when Mr. Liberty brings us a tray with a silver pot of tea. There are two delicate cups in a blue and white pattern of Japanese design and a small plate of shortbread biscuits.

“You must excuse me now; I’m going to take advantage of this rainy day to do an inventory in the back room. If by any chance, someone does come in, would you fetch me?”

“Of course. Thank you for this marvelous repast.”

I like how William Morris speaks, as if he’s visiting from another time.

“Yes, thank you,” I add.

“You are most welcome, both of you. A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Tytler.”

With a humble bow, he slips away, and I am alone with William Morris. It has grown darker outside, and it seems doubtful that any customers will be coming to the shop. I realize it is only here that I can sit and have tea with this man without worrying that someone might see us together.

I realize the contrast, how I’ve always felt like a foreigner my whole life. Born in India, to Scottish parents, my mother died when I was two. Father brought my two older sisters and I back to Edinburgh and deposited us in a castle to live with his brother and the rest of our extended family. He went back to India, remarried and had more children. It was my sister Christine, ten years older than I, who took on the role of mother, continually trying to educate me in how to reflect well on the Fraser-Tytler family.

It was while I was engaged in my art education in London that my father decided to retire from the East India Company and come here to live with his wife and three children. I was offered a maid’s room on the third floor of a modest house in East London. Having very little of my savings left, I had no choice but to accept this arrangement, even though I was a stranger to my father and to his “other” family. As a woman, I also feel foreign to London. It restricts my movements just as my clothing does. There are so many places where I am made to feel uncomfortable, even threatened. But meeting William Morris has been like coming to my real and only home. Talking with him like this, has been like seeing my own reflection in a mirror, finding out who I really am.

We sip our tea and enjoy our biscuits with only the crackling of the fire and the rain at the window to accompany our conversation.

“What you said about bringing the craftsman up in partnership with artists. It sounds true and right, but...how on earth is it to be done? How, as an artist, would I start?”

He sets his cup down gently and wipes his mouth with a napkin.

“You may recall me saying I do not want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few.”

“Yes...”

“Tell me, Mary. What do you want to do with your life?”

He leans forward in his chair opposite me, so close his knees almost touch mine. I draw in my breath.

“I want to make something as beautiful as a green field.”

He smiles.

“You’re an artist. So, find that life. Trust in it. But along the way, you must find opportunities to share your education and cultivate the capacity to appreciate the beauty in others.”

“Do you mean that I should teach?”

He raises and lowers his shoulders.

“Possibly. But I don’t mean teach people who already have that capacity and the means to pay. I mean bring your lessons to those who can’t afford it, to those who have never been given that opportunity and most likely never will.”

“Who do you mean specifically?”

“I mean the men and women who slave away at drudgery, who are never given the chance to make anything beautiful.”

I sit back in the chair.

“You mean scullery maids and delivery boys?”

“Yes. And dock workers, cab drivers and shoe blacks. These people are all around us, Mary. They’ve been handed a life of dreary repetition, working like machines with no chance to make anything of their own that might lighten their hearts.”

“But how? How could I take them from their work to teach them a craft? Wouldn’t I be interrupting the activity they rely on for their livelihood? I have the very same problem. I make very little with my art. How would I find the time to share that skill in a class without paying students?”

“That’s the part to think about, isn’t it? It takes finding others with the same vision, a charitable institution perhaps, a group who might help fund such an endeavor. It will require you to find a way to do your artwork that might include others, teach them the potential of it for their lives and for promoting the decorative arts.”

This troubles me. He is talking about a different society, some idealized world of the future. Perhaps he’s thinking of a world like one where those farmers are, in the mountains of Switzerland, where necessity makes artists of them all. But in London? These positions in society are fixed, usually for generations. And there is often contempt for anyone who tries to change that.

“People say you are a communist.”

“Well, I’ve been called worse.” He smiles. “But in truth, I’m a socialist. It’s not the same thing at all.”

“How do you see it?”

“A socialist must convince people to work together for a common good. A communist has already decided it’s the right thing to do and seeks to force people into it.”

“I see.” I glance at the window. It is getting late. “This is all very interesting to me, Mr. Morris.”

“Please. Call me William.”

This pleases me. *We are already friends.*

“Thank you, William. It has been...extremely meaningful to me, to talk with you like this. But it’s late, and I should be going.”

William reaches over and takes my hand.

“Don’t give up, Mary. I have faith in you. The answer to your questions won’t come along today or tomorrow but keep them in mind and someday the answers will present themselves. The Arts and Crafts movement is small now. But it will grow.”

“Can I join it?”

“You already have. This work is in your heart, and it will be a privilege to watch you bring it about in the world. You will do great things, Mary. I’m sure of it.”

He then leans forward, still holding my hand, and with the other, he reaches up and strokes my cheek, his green eyes shining in the firelight. And at that moment I want only one thing and that’s for William Morris to kiss me, but I see hesitation and the moment is gone.

“I should go too,” he says and stands up. “I’ve enjoyed meeting you very much, Mary Tytler.” He pulls a business card out of his coat and presents me with it. “Please feel free to write to me at this address. I’d love to talk with you again sometime. We must continue our conversation.”

I walk out of the shop, walking taller and with greater happiness than I’ve ever had in my life. I don’t feel alone anymore. There is something in me that feels awakened. I’m finding a connection to the life I’m supposed to have. Pieces and parts are coming to me like a dream. I think this feeling is hope. Not in having a traditional life as an artist, but in finding my own unique life as an artist, which, as William Morris has said, will mean finding collaborators, other people with whom I might form alliances. I see a sliver of a path before

me. From behind me I hear the clapping of horse hooves on the street. There's a cab. I wave to the driver to get his attention and soon I am speeding back to my father's house.

After paying the driver, I turn and face the front gate. The curtains are drawn in the front parlor windows, but the lights are still on. The bells from the nearby church have just rung eleven. I hope one of the maids will still be up to let me in so I can go upstairs to bed without waking anyone. After I knock, the front door opens, but it's my father who answers. He is in his dressing gown, glaring at me with barely disguised rage.