

The Death of Topsy

by Philip Henderson

A recent acquisition of the British Library's Department of Manuscripts (Add. MSS 57772.XX) is of rather special interest. It is a one act playlet by D. G. Rossetti, *The Death of Topsy: a Drama of the Future in One Unjustifiable Act*, unsigned, but in Rossetti's handwriting, and contained in an envelope address: Mrs William Morris, Horrington House, Turnham Green Road. The envelope is sealed with Rossetti's monogram and the postmark is 'Oct 7 78'.* The dramatis personae are as follows: William Topsy Morris (an upholsterer and author of *The Earthly Paradise*), Wardle (his Manager), Mrs Madeline Wardle, First Young Wardle, Second Young Wardle, Third Young Wardle, A Grocer, A Pharmaceutical Chemist, First Cabman, Second Cabman, Edward Burne-Jones (a Man of Genius), Stennett (a carpenter and under-

*This provides useful confirmation of the statement by Morris's biographer, Mackail, that the Morrises did not remove to Kelmscott Manor until the end of October. Ed.

taker), Ford Madox Brown (a Historical Painter), Emma (his wife), Mrs Guppy (a Medium), The Ghost of Warrington Taylor, The Ghost of Topsy, The Ghost of Percy Bysshe Shelley. Scene London.

The Death of Topsy is an apparently slight production, with a distinctly bitter undertone, making play with the usual stock jokes against Morris—his clumsiness, his swearing, his undisguised pleasure in food, his inconsistency and his concern about his growing fatness. The principal theme of the play is the poisoning of Morris by the Wardles, so that they can take over the Firm. A rather grim joke, some may think.

Scene I: On one side an upholsterer's shop, with the name 'Morris & Co' over the door. On the other side a grocer's shop. The scene opens with some by-play between the Wardles over the new deed of partnership they are preparing. While one young Wardle goes into the grocer's shop to buy some coffee for his mother, his brother is seen going off in the direction of a chemist's shop in order—as transpires later—to buy some poison, also for his mother. Since Rossetti (and therefore the others) evidently knew that Madeline Wardle was before her marriage the Madeleine Smith who was thought to have poisoned her lover with arsenic and whose case was finally dismissed as 'not proven', the implications here are not really very funny.

Scene II St Jame's Hall. Burne-Jones has slipped an addition of his own into Morris' lecture notes, while Morris is storming against restoration, making him attribute the glories of medieval ecclesiastical architecture to faith in 'that Power which alone could have inspired such mighty achievements'.

Morris (aside as before): I know that damned Ned has stuck it in. (*Goes on*) Little could those great yet humble ones have dreamed that a too puffed-up posterity—(*scratches the seat of his trousers, and looks uneasily at the curtain behind him*) would have devoted all their efforts only to the defacement of the noble structures bequeathed to their keeping by god-like minds and hands. (*Aside through the curtains*). I say, Ned, damn you!

E. Burne-Jones (*from behind the curtain*): I didn't do it, Top—you wrote it yourself. Its very bad, but go on or the audience will hiss.

Finally Morris lurches off the platform, displaying a large

T chalked on his back by Burne-Jones, amid great applause.

Scene III shows Morris at the Wardles, telling them about Ned's practical jokes at his lecture.

Top: Blow that Ned. (*Aside through his teeth*) I should like to tread his guts out.

Wardle: He hasn't got any.

Top: O I say, talk about guts—what's become of mine? (*He stands up, and taking a quartern loaf from the table, stuffs it into the waist-band of his trousers to show how much room there is—then pulls it out again and puts it back on the plate.*) There, now just you mind you don't call me fat any more.

Wardle: I never did. I always thought you a fine figure.

Madeline: Mr Morris, you're letting your coffee get cold. George, dear, hand the cup.

Top (taking cup from Wardle): All right, old chap. (*Drinks*) Hullo! how can I have the gripes now that I've got no belly? Hullo! Blow! (*dies*).

Scene IV shows Wardle mounting a ladder outside Morris & Co. in order to substitute Wardle & Co.

First Cabman (passing): Hi! Who's the Co?

Second Cabman (passing): Why, coffee—in course.

Topsy is carried out on a stretcher. The Madox Browns also pass on the top of a bus. Seeing the altered name over the door, Brown raises his eyes and his hands to heaven.

Scene V is a seance at the medium's house. *Mrs Guppy seated at a table of Victorian design, with ghosts and others.*

Ghost of Taylor: Topsy, you fool, come along, here's a chance for you. Split on 'em through that table, and let 'em catch it as they deserve.

Ghost of Topsy: Get out, it's beastly rot. Do you think I'm going to believe in bogies merely because I'm one myself? And besides, you don't suppose, you idiot, that I'd talk through a blowed table of such a damned shape as that! (*Indulges in language after his kind.*)

Mrs Guppy: That is the very lowest class of spirit in which I ever had experience. May not the essence of such misused humanity rank even below the soulless beasts that perish? Who shall say? Well, he is gone, my friends—I dread to think whither. (*She turns to the table.*) Shelley, are you there?

Ghost of Percy Bysshe Shelley: Hi diddle diddle
The cat and the fiddle.

Mrs Guppy: Hush, my friends, now indeed we shall hear something.

Curtain.

This little play, for all its jocular tone, would seem to demonstrate several things about Rossetti: bitterness at Morris' recent high-handed reorganization of the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. under his sole control, resentment of Morris as an obstacle between himself and Janey, and a possibly subconscious wish for his death. At any rate, the fun, such as it is, is distinctly barbed.