SPEECH AT A MEETING OF THE KYRLE SOCIETY, KENSINGTON VESTRY HALL, 27 JANUARY 1881

Among the other Speakers were Prince Leopold, the Duke of Albany (President of the Society), Lord Leighton, Sir Andrew Clark, and Mr G. A. Sala.

I FEEL that there is a difficulty in the way of my advocating before you the claims of the Kyrle Society to public support; its case is almost too good to bear much talking about it; it seems to me a question with only one side to it, and that it cannot be debated. The Society is in the position of having no enemies; it neither has them, nor, I should say, can have them, therefore it must dispense altogether with the most effective means of attracting public attention; which I suppose to be a good hearty quarrel with

one's fellow human beings, one's fellow-countrymen. And really if it be hard for anyone to make many words on this peaceful subject it must be specially hard for me, since I belong to other societies that it seems are particularly offensive; societies that count their foes by the thousand and their friends by the unit: so that now when I have to say something about this most inoffensive, but most useful Society, I feel like a fish out of water, and don't know what to say except that it *is* useful. Yet you must understand that I use the word enemies in a narrow sense, meaning by the word irritated human beings: but in another sense it has enemies, who are indeed enemies to the whole human race, but in their present form are peculiar to our own time and perhaps to our own nation; their names are Carelessness, Ugliness, and Squalor. The Kyrle Society has been founded to fight against these, and has fought against them in a humble and unobtrusive manner, which was at the same time the manner readiest to hand; and it now seeks to rally you against them, and to ask you to help it somewhat in its own special warfare against these oppressive evils—evils which modern civilization has changed in form, but kept in substance, evils which are specially bred by our system of huge towns, and above all by this great city, or rather by this land of bricks and mortar called London. What a dreadful place I used to think it when I sometimes came into it as a boy! We have got used to it now, and cannot see it as it really is; but if we could do so for a few hours, what a nightmare we should think it! I cannot help fancying that we should give up many things that now seem important to us, and turn to and try to amend it to the utmost of our power.

Meanwhile there are amongst us various ways of treating these evils, the squalor and ugliness that come of carelessness and despair: the first is the simplest, it is to shut one's eyes to them, and say, and perhaps to think, that they don't exist: those who can take this way I must really call fortunate, too fortunate to be numerous, I should think: myself I don't know any of these happy people.

Well then next, there are those who admit the existence of the evils aforesaid, and say 'twere well if they could be got rid of, but since they are a necessary part of the life of the nineteenth century, and of all other centuries to come; since we can't get rid of them, let us bear them as well as we can, and forget them: indeed a good many of this easy-going folk do manage to bear their neighbours' troubles pretty well. Fortunate, they also, I suppose we must say; and yet—is it not somewhat strange that they have never thought that since these evils live, they must follow the laws of life, and grow also; that they have never thought what they may grow into, what terrible monsters, born of them, society shaken out of its sloth may have one day to face?

Again there is another way of dealing with these evils, about which I know more than I do of the others: there are some of us who know how real, how heavy, how pressing these evils are, and who are grieved by them even amidst their own well-to-do and happy lives: nor can we for one moment suppose that they are a part of the eternal order of things, that they are inseparable from the progress of the race from savagery to civilization: they seem to us rather to be the outcome of the blindness and hurry of short-lived men, who as it seems when they set themselves ardently to seek one good must needs forget another. All this we know and feel, and long for a change for the better, and even hope for it, remembering the course of history.

Yet the very keenness with which these of us feel the crimes of civilization, the squalor with which it has surrounded the lives of most men, is apt to betray us into doing nothing. So huge the contrast is between what waits to be done, and what is possible to be done at once, that we are discouraged.

For think of the lofty ideal that lies before us, of Society all changed for the better; how we look forward to the day when poverty shall be a name only for a dreadful phantom of the past; when the brutality of the poor and the insolence of the rich shall have been slain by hope and pleasure shared by all; when the man of the most refined occupation, stu-

dent, artiſt, physician, what not, 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; and when as a sign and symbol of all this, and the necessary outcome of it, this very London, which even many years ago Cobbett in his disguſt would call the *wen*, shall have become a delightful abode of men, full of beauty and guiltless of any spot of squalor.

All this we can see as something that might be if people in general would but once for all set their hearts on it, nay, as something that one day will be, whatever gulf may lie between it and us: but we do not know how to set to work to bridge that gulf full of possible violences and revolutions, and of certain disappointments. Nay, that is a great word; we do not even know what it may be of some little use to throw into the gulf as a beginning of the foundation for the bridge that after ages shall build. We who long, it may be no less than any, for the coming day of our ideal, do not know, outside the ordinary daily duties of our lives, whitherward to turn our hands that we may help that coming day one ſtep forward.

So however happy those may be who cannot see, and will not care, we cannot be happy; I will say for us that we have at leaſt the grace to be discontented. And unless we are to live and die in our discontent there is nothing for it, but to do something, the firſt thing that comes to hand, *to the utmoſt of our power*, not fearing that meantime our ideal will escape our vision, nor overweighted by the sense of the insignificance of what each of us personally can do againſt the huge mass that has to be moved; since we may well wrap ourselves in the faith, that when our share of the work is over, others will take it up: the cause needs us and will use us, but it will not ſtand ſtill for our departure, but will carry our work along with us for ever.

Now it seems to me that this is the way along which the Kyrle Society desires to go: this is the spirit in which it sets about its work: of the details of that work others can tell you much better than I can; but I will ask you to think of it as

both encouraging those who are condemned life-long to the prison of a squalid London street to try to make the best even of that, and also as trying to stir in their minds that longing for beauty which even yet lies dormant in most men's hearts. That the Society has been able in some degree to do this, is clear from the constant applications for its services, and from the very fact that it has to-day definitely put itself before the public.

And I must take leave to say that those who may think this a contribution of small moment towards the perfection of our civilization, do not know whence art springs or whitherward it aims. Its aim is the making life happy and dignified for *all* people. To succeed in such an aim, is it not necessary that it should both spring from and be cherished by the people at large? Believe me, if to-day it seems otherwise, if art has taken refuge altogether among the highest intelligences and the greatest cultivation, it is because it has for the moment ceased to be progressive, and rests upon the memory of the popular energy of past times, and if this be not changed, if the people do not insist on having their share of it, I know most surely that art will die out of civilization. I am wondering if civilization will live when art is dead.

Now though the resolution I am seconding says nothing about one great work the Society is forwarding, I must ask you not to think I am wandering from the question if I speak of it: I mean its valiant attempt both to save open spaces from bricks and mortar, and to make them open in another sense, from bolts and locks I mean: for I feel clear, as I am sure you will if you think of it, that it is idle to talk about popularizing art, if you are not prepared to popularize reverence for nature also, both among the poor and the rich. Can you expect the people to believe you to be in earnest in bidding them to love art and cultivate it, if they see you in your greed for riches, or your fear of what are falsely called commercial interests, take no heed of and pay no reverence to the greatest of all gifts to the world, the very source of art, the natural beauty of the Earth? For my part, and I am

sure you all feel with me, words fail me to express my gratitude to any man who has saved for us in London so much as one tree or one plot of grass.

Now for myself I believe that what the Society has actually carried out in various ways is far from unimportant: but if by chance any over sanguine or impatient person should think the achievements small, I would bid him consider how important a work the Society does by calling public attention to these matters: it is no malice or ill-will that has brought about the evils I have been speaking of, only thoughtlessness. Remember what wonderful things men have done when they wanted to do them: what energy and ingenuity past belief almost, people in this country have spent in carrying out things they have set their hearts on, sometimes, I must say, little to their own benefit or that of the world at large: think of all this, I say, and then tell me if I am wrong in saying, that if it be impossible to turn this London of ours from being the disgrace to civilization which it now is, into being a beautiful abode of man, if it be impossible to make London what the old ballad calls it—Lovely London—it will be because it is impossible to convince our fellow-countrymen that such a change is good and to be longed for.

Well, I know it will be a difficult thing to do: a long piece of work to abolish our enemies, Carelessness, Squalor, and Ugliness: but it is because I do not think it impossible, because I will never accept the counsels of despair, but will believe that the good time is on the road, that I stand before you now and beg leave to second this resolution with all my heart.