

## NOTTINGHAM KYRLE SOCIETY, 1881

**I** FEEL rather shy and timid at having to speak to the citizens of this ancient and famous City, I a Londoner, of subjects which to say the truth London does not understand very well itself: but the truth is that such great centres of labour as this city is have great advantages over

the overgrown country of bricks and mortar called London, and so far from my having any particular hope that London will move them, what I really look for is that they will move London: for whatever other interest may attach to them, doubtful or not, they claim our undoubted interest in one respect—that they make something.

[Here he tells a story about a Cobbler at Chester.]

Well, as I turned away from my acquaintance I fell a-thinking of the ways of great towns, & before I had got to the next gate of the ancient walls, I was thinking more of London than Chester; and came to the conclusion that we Cockneys also must say of ourselves that a great part of our business was living on one another: and that in that respect we were at a disadvantage as compared with the dwellers in towns whose chief business was doing something, making tangible wares: goods, as our tongue still expressively calls them. London is the counting-house; Nottingham and its sisters are the workshops; and I who am a workman cannot help being more interested in the workshops than the counting-house: and at any rate my hope, my reasonable hope I will call it, is that the workshops of England will help us people of the counting-house to live a little more decently than we have been doing of late, and even in a steady and friendly way to compel us to do so.

I have said elsewhere, and I shall never lose an opportunity of repeating it, that whatever hope we artists of these latter days have for the future of art rests on those who have to do with making things. People who have the unhappiness to live vague lives, and take their surroundings for granted, who look upon art as a kind of superstition of civilization, a sort of magic growth of certain morbid intellects: these can't help us: their praise or blame is equally useless to us; I think their very money when we get it turns to dead leaves or slate stones like the ill-gotten gold of fairy stories. Depend upon it, art, which is the very highest of all realities, the explanation of the depth of them, can only be helped by people whose daily life consists in dealing with

realities; men whose honour and comfort, nay, their daily bread depends upon their looking keenly into the nature of things; whose practical knowledge gives them a right to say when they look at things fashioned by man, this is genuine, well made—good: this is pretentious, ill-made—false.

These are the people to whom I feel sure the art of to-day must appeal. There are many grades among them: they include men of the highest cultivation, of the greatest powers both intellectual and material. But I shall not be likely to offend anyone here, I think, by reminding you that the whole class of those who make anything is founded on that great mass of people whose very hands make them, called in the slang of to-day, the working classes: surely 'tis to these that the ultimate appeal must be made, in art as in other matters. If they will not have art, we the cultivated and rich people cannot have it: if they cannot have it, if our social system forbids it to them, be sure that the day is not far distant when the cultivated part of our society will refuse art also, will have grown utterly blind to it.

I cannot believe such a misery possible: for I do think that people of all classes will unite to prevent its falling on the world. Yet if they were not to do so, such an end would not only be possible but certain: to help forward the organizing of all thoughtful people to resist such a return to barbarism, nay, to a state of degradation far worse than barbarism, for that was hopeful—is not this a worthy end and aim? That and no other I believe to be the end and aim of the Kyrle Society: and it begins by striving to show the working classes that there is such a thing as art and that it is for them as well as for their richer fellows to enlist their good-will in favour of art, that is in favour of the aspirations and progress of the race towards perfection.

These are great words for what some of you may think small things, for what we all admit are small beginnings; but as you know well all great things may grow from a small root if it but be a piece of nature and planted as nature will have it.

And though the Kyrle Society be not what is usually called an artistic Society, though its aims are not art merely, yet I say that all artists owe it a debt of gratitude for beginning at the right end. True we have all of us heard discussions as to whether art should be for art's sake, should itself be its own end, or be done for a purpose—most fruitless discussions they are, I must say, mere confusion of words. You may be sure both that a real artist does his work because he likes it, and that when done 'tis a blessing to his fellows.

If I had been Robinson Crusoe and had had the courage and patience to make those beautiful pots of which we all read with such pleasure, to be sure I would have managed to have painted or scratched something on them. No true sailor should I have been if I had not somehow got my polly on them and my dog and my cat, and some hint of my impenetrable wood: yet whiles be sure I should have sighed heavily enough to think that there was nobody by me that could share my pleasure and half understand my conceit in the work of my own hands: and whiles I should have dreamed that one day people in England might get hold of my handiwork and nudge one another as they said, Look what the poor devil did alone on his desert island, isn't it clever? That's the way to draw a cat with a sharp stick on damp clay.

Every work of art is both a good thing in itself though nobody sees it, and if seen will influence the minds and lives of men, and lead to other things scarce guessed at by those who wrought it. There is no market in the world where selfish art can be bought: the thing doesn't exist. You may steal art, or oppress people in order to get it: the worse for you and those that come after you; for nature will revenge herself on swindling and oppression: but don't call art a thief and a tyrant because you are a thief and a tyrant; that is a mere confusion of ideas.

Yet though all true artists are benefactors to their race, and increase the wealth of the world: yet those serve art and the world well who both see clearly that healthy art must be shared by all, and directly and in their own day in the face of



all discouragement set to work to bring about equality of this blessing as far as is possible and natural: this is what the founders of the Kyrle Society have done in the most unobtrusive manner and yet I think with no small share of success considering the huge difficulties in the way of even beginning anything with real hope.

I have said that art to have any hope for the future must enlist on its side the good will of the working classes: it is just this good will which the Kyrle Society has steadily kept in view as the chief object to be attained to. And I say it is a difficult thing to attain to. Do any of you find it hard to think how if you had been born among the unluckier classes you would have looked upon art? for first you might well have had no faintest idea of what the word meant: and if you had you must have had a courageous heart indeed if, living in a London slum, you could have had any hope of ever sharing in it. Nay, 'tis a dreadful thing to have to say, a frightful threat against the stability of Society, but there would most like have been in you a feeling of spite and hatred warring against what inborn spirit of refinement you had got: which unless your good-nature overcame it would impel you to a silent (perhaps silent) rage against the half-known good that you had so little chance of sharing. Indeed I fear that with many, nay most of us, that is all the fellowship with art we should have had if no one had tried to help us in our quagmire of sordidness. Most true it is that whiles when I am sitting at home at work or in rest with all the aids to a pleasant life around me which mere chance as it seems has given me, and I hear outside brutal and drunken voices, murdering with obscene language and coarse tones the pleasure of the fair spring Sunday, there rises up in me the brutality of my own heart and would stir me into fury against that other brutality if I did not remember that these also are my fellows, merely unluckier than I: not worse. And then indeed I fall a-wondering at the strange and slender thread of circumstance which has armed me for doing and forbearing with that refinement which I didn't make myself, but

was born into. That, I say, I wonder at; but not at all at the scenes of savagery that disgrace our streets at the worst, at the breaking of trees and uprooting of flowers, and scoring of images and the like which do here and there take place; done I imagine by a very few hands if we came to look into it: or at greater matters than that; all the crimes that people without amusement but with their full share of love of excitement must needs fall into from time to time.

And, Sir, 'tis at these times of shame, when my own responsibility for all this weighs heaviest upon me that I feel most gratitude towards those pioneers of hope who have shown us that there is something to be done to better it, those who while they know most of this shameful side of our civilization fear least to face it, and, trusting to the mass of innate good will that is abundantly to be found even among the squalor of our great towns, have determined to do that something, though to many it may appear but little and to themselves least of all. I do not doubt that their ideal of Society is high—nay the highest: I do not believe that they look upon the practical work they are doing as mere palliation of a state of things which they are contented to look upon as necessary and enduring. Doubtless they have been able to say even in times of dejection, when the hope of radical change was furthest from them, We have at least made a few people happier here and there, and that at all events is something. This has been a mere consolation to inevitable weakness: what they have been looking to is this rather, that every one whom they have enlightened, everyone to whom they have shown the existence of art and the possibility of even poor people getting some enjoyment from it, everybody to whom they have given a better chance of seeing leaves and flowers and grass from time to time has been turned in a small way into a missionary of beauty; for their trust has been in the love of beauty being no accident of high culture but an inborn part of every man born into the world, which is only unproductive when it is forcibly stifled. Nor do I think that they will find their trust deceive them; I believe those whom they have helped will not be silently grate-

ful only, but will be inclined to elbow their neighbours with a 'Here see you; this pretty thing, and this; such things are to be got if we look out and help ourselves.'

Now if they have had any such success I must needs think that it has been earned on the whole by wisdom and prudence in a difficult and delicate task: for the Society has entered perforce on the perilous path of gift-giving: perilous, I say, for gift-giving is an art, and the penalty of breaking the rules of that art is that the gift injures both giver and taker and not seldom sets them by the ears. Carelessness, self-seeking, patronage, these are the snares besetting the art, from which I seriously think the Kyrle Society has escaped scot-free: and the token of this is the thorough good will with which their gifts have been taken; there has been gain on one side in the matter, and no loss on the other.

Perhaps our own members will excuse a word of caution from me on this matter of gift-giving: I need not tell them that giving away what one does not value oneself is no gift. That they will know very well; but furthermore it is so pleasant to do a piece of work and give it away, that is so very much a pleasure on a pleasure, that we are sometimes over-enthusiastic about our own work under these blinding circumstances. In short, we ought to be very careful that any work of decoration that we do should be at least up to the standard of marketable work of a similar kind—and as much beyond it as possible. We must not assume because people unused to art like what we furnish them with it is therefore good enough for them; nothing but good—that is, real—art is of any good to anyone.

But a good deal of the work of the Kyrle Society is of a kind that I should think almost everyone would admit to be useful; though how specially useful it may be in Nottingham I as almost a stranger cannot tell. I am alluding to the Society's efforts to get more light and air into our big towns, our well-beloved but very criminal London more especially: it is cheering to find that on the whole public opinion is with us on this point. That is to say at least that the public would very decidedly like our towns to be free from smoke,



and to have many open spaces in them, if they could get these advantages without spending any trouble or money on them. How that can be done I don't profess to be able to tell them, and should be against the appointment of a sub-Committee of the Society to consider how 'tis possible to carry out impossibilities: nevertheless it is a great step to have made that people will think about the matter at all, that they have begun to be somewhat ashamed of the smoke and squalor of our big towns. Time was when we were rather proud of it: let us hope that the next step, and not a far distant one, will be that a very great number of people will be ready to make considerable sacrifices both of time and money, for the attainment of a decent life; and the next, though that belike is a long way off, that only a small minority will refuse to make those sacrifices: such a very small minority at last, that the nation will ask its representatives to make laws that will enable it to gain these advantages without injustice to individuals, and to find it servants who will ensure their being carried out.

Well, of course I know we have got a long way to travel before we come to that, and by the time such laws are made very few will be in the least inclined to break them. Long before that time a capitalist will be as much ashamed of letting his factory chimnies pour out a dense cloud of smoke as he would be now of robbing on the highway; a railway company will no more think of running their line through a recreation ground of the people than they now would through Buckingham Palace; the Square gardens will be both unfenced and unhurt: nay the poorest quarters will have some garden or other, public or private, easily accessible to them: no landowner will grudge people wandering over his park or fields, where they are doing no damage to stocks or crops; nor indeed will anybody think of going anywhere where they could do damage; no builder will cut down a tree until he has exhausted his ingenuity in planning his houses so as to avoid it.

Sir, I am as sure that that day will come, as that I shall not see it with my bodily eyes: in that day the work of the



Kyrle Society will be over, though it may be it will yet be remembered. Whether it be or not matters little, I think; for however it may fare with its memory, its deeds at least will live: and in the meantime to us who are still alive, while its hope is yet so far from being fulfilled that to some it may seem but folly to hope at all, its deeds are not unhelpful—nay not only to the common good but also to us who are able ever so little to further those deeds. True that the evil we don't see doesn't grieve us: but the evil we do see and fear to attack, how grievous is that! Why, we can never get it out of our heads, and it turns even our daily speech into mere railing: but once set to work and all is changed: sourness and grumbling change into good humoured defiance, into successful convincing of adversaries; dullness turns into something like pleasure, blindness into insight: as day by day the evil lessens, we get to see through its huge mass, so black, so impassable once, and beyond it stretches before our eyes the fair day of our hope and there in our deeds whatever has been true and strong about them alive and fruitful still.