

The International Union of Arts and Crafts - Part 1

by A.L. Pogosky

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[Page 1] IN all ages, in all countries, everywhere where Life is, Work is, was, and ever will be the eternal expression of Man, his eternal function of Service. Some may be conscious of it, some may not. Some may seek in it the most sacred outlet for the Soul to reach God, and then we have the creation of such works as the divine heirlooms of masters, in pictures, poems, sculptures; some may take to work instinctively as one who has thirst takes a drink of water, whether it is handed to him in a crystal vessel, or whether he has to bend over a brooklet like that very simple inhabitant of the woods — the young goat or the wood-pigeon. Some, again, in their instinctive longing to fulfil their function, obediently bend their neck under the yoke of heavy labour, like a willing horse or ox.

All these differences do not hide from the thinker the deep significance of one great idea of human life, the greatest, the most sacred — WORK.

Long, aye, too long, have we been ignoring this. We have been toying with it, perverting its very [Page 2] foundation into every possible shape; under what we are pleased to call our social conditions, we have made it an object of barter, a means of injustice and cruelty, a means of subjugation and degradation.

Truly depressing is the contemplation of all the tragic sights which surround us at present, the problems of labour which baffle the clearest minds. But there is a great hope which manifests itself daily in human life: No sooner does a man form an earnest decision to seek for Truth, to re-establish the broken Law, than a great transformation scene ensues, misery becomes joy, the most difficult problems become as clear as daylight.

Anyone who has gone through the second birth — call it what you will — or who has, after a toilsome life of disharmony, fruitless efforts and struggles, at last found himself, knows and knows well how, when the true law is found and re-established in life — in spite of the required sacrifice of those sides of life which we are brought up to consider as the true and desirable ends of life — it works wonders; how the frowns of the depressed, miserable toiler smooth away into gladness and joy; how distrust, suspicion, even hatred, turn into love and welcome; how every new day, instead of being a weary sigh, is welcomed by a joyous leap of the grateful heart.

So let us consider these important matters together; let us follow the threads one by one, trying to find where the tangle began; let us unite in one joyful band of Seekers after Truth, after the law of Work, of Life; let us unite all men and women of all nations, [Page 3] of all creeds; let us help each other in the supreme task of regeneration; here is a task, indeed, which wants the union of all temperaments., all histories, all races, all experiences. Such a band has already been formed — on the 9th July, 1910 —

into a nucleus of workers, and is sending this message to all brothers and sisters in Work throughout the world : Join us and help us to find Truth.

Shall we speak of the modern state of all the aspects of Work ? Is it not the sorest of sores of every thinker, of every lover of humanity ? Why, the very toiler would laugh in our face if we dared to state the simple truth : Work must be one with Love. Yet if we think of an example of good, useful, or gifted and inspired work, we cannot help seeing that this is true. The artist who expresses his best in his " work " loves it. The peasant who walks after the plough loves the field, the horse co-worker, the bird which flutters round the newly opened furrow, the sky and sun overhead, the brooklet which refreshes his tired body ; he loves the vision of his heavily loaded sheaves in the near future, the very smell of the earth and its fruit.

The philosopher, who for years and years accumulates new arguments and aspects of his idea which he gives to the world, does not grudge the many years his work of love and devotion will take; he loves his idea too well to robe it in indifferent clothing ; he wants it as beautiful, as magnificent, as transparent, as it appears to him in his moments of ecstasy and illumination.

[Page 4] The work of a woman is the endless expression of her love and devotion in its many aspects, in its many varieties of degrees according to her own development; it falls as low as the simple providing of food and comfort for the bodily wants of her beloved ones; it rises often as high as heaven in meeting the spiritual needs of those she brought into the world, inspiring them with lofty ideals and virtues.

Let us look a little further, and observe the modern development of this all-important function.

The artist who no longer seeks to express *himself*, because he has to sell the pictures, and his ideal may not please the buyer — aye, may even, by wakening the conscience of the moneyed buyer, inspire unpleasant feeling and revulsion — instead of lovingly clothing his idea and handing it lovingly to the world, has to lower himself in order to please, has to hand it to the public with a curse and hatred, because of his own lowering, his own degradation.

The musician, who, in his upward path, heard the angels sing, who himself kept the heavenly harmonies stored in his best Self, appears on the public platform. The common ear of the profane cannot hear the subtle, heavenly strains. It is overhung with ostrich feathers, overwhelmed with worldly gossip and self-consciousness; so the musician has to accomplish sensational feats of musical gymnastic, overtop his predecessor, make a " record " of musical " performance " to reach this common ear. There is no love lost between these again. There cannot be, **[Page 5]** as for the sake of this audience the heavenly strains must be forgotten, ignored.

Where is the one who walked after his plough, inhaling the bitter-sweet smell of Mother-Earth, basking and sweating under the summer sun, dreaming of his golden crop ? Where is he now ? Alas ! you find him the slave of a machine, no more a poet nor a creator of crops and beauty, no more in direct contact with Isis, but depressed, defiled, pale and small-hearted, afraid of the next day, bitter and cursing his fate, when after his day's work he returns "home" not unlike one of those "clinkers" rolled into waste among ashes, all the life taken out of him. No love, to be sure, here, no expression of his individual divine Self,

no present, no future, even no past to lovingly remember.

The scholar, the writer — -where is he ? Where are those many who, like millions of seeds, are shaken over the Earth by liberal divine hands, to spread life and beauty into every corner of our earth ? Alas ! We find them again and again drudging away, living only with part of their hearts and minds, ignoring their best Selves, giving what they have to give only for money, educating often a new taste for what is low and demoralising. For our own demoralisation must spread, must tell on all we touch.

Blessed are those who carry their real light through all difficulties. Those are they who will save humanity.

How did the trouble begin ? When was the law broken ?

[Page 6] Every corner of the world has its own history of this Fall. And this is one point where we, the Fellows of the International Union of Workers, may help each other. Let the Irish worker tell us when, and under what influence, the expression of his Keltic soul ceased to be a natural outlet for his individual gifts, and became an object of barter. Let the Hindû tell us when his hour of degradation came, and what brought it on. When did the grand lines of his creative architects change into the mean " modern style," no longer a symbol of his soul, beliefs and aspirations ? When did it happen, for the first sad time, that the maiden came to the well holding on her shoulders not the classical, curved earthen vessel, but — horror of all horrors — a tin kerosene can ? When were the noble, flowing garments of hand-spun and woven web of soft hues exchanged for cotton, machine-made rags of the vilest colours ? When we find the cause and the time of these changes in history, we shall also have found the cause of the loss of love in Work, and the point to which we shall have to return again, and to direct our efforts to start afresh, with a wisdom aided by long years of experience. Let the Russian tell us how he lost the love of Work, so evidently manifested in every fragment of ancient work, of which the country is still overfull. No, not even very ancient. Not so many years ago there was no pair of hands, among the peasants at least, which could not express itself in many ways, in weaving and embroidery, in carving and modeling —express itself in a language **[Page 7]** sanctified by tradition, by beliefs, and by the memory of their ancient eastern cradle. Some are yet living, and still creating beauty.

The dwellers of the towns lost all this, simply by turning their faces away from traditions, from deserted, defiled churches, from their own history. There was a new craving for western civilisation. No price seemed too high to pay for this semblance of culture.

The peasant lost his old love for his work in another way. Daily and hourly came the wily thief nearer to the door; money was heeded for causes foreign to his interest. Money was needed badly for war, for keeping in subjugation the Russian frontiers, frontiers encircling millions and millions of acres which peasants dared not touch., dared not transform into a garden of life, of golden crops, of happiness for all. Money was also badly wanted for keeping up thousands and thousands of tax-collectors, hard taskmasters, excise officials, controllers, a whole army of oppressors. It was also needed for building expensive official buildings, where an army of clerks were busy writing unnecessary papers and smoking unnecessary cigarettes all day long. It was needed to build expensive buildings for official Science, presided over by docile scholars, dispensing their dead facts to the youths of the towns.

What did the worker of the fields, the poet of the hills, dales, rivers and lakes, know of all this ? Nothing whatever ! But in his humble way, in his [Page 8] habit of obedience to forces beyond his small self, he bent his neck lower and lower, he increased his efforts more and more, he got panic-stricken sometimes with all the misery, and the needs, and the neglect of his fellow-men, he who had no time to think, to rest, to take better care of his body, of his home and children, while working unceasingly to satisfy those mysterious needs claimed by his betters!

In olden times, he was a free man. He lived unmolested in God's own garden, he lovingly tended it, deriving from its beautiful fruit all he needed. The golden crops of grain and seeds, the cream-white potatoes, the rich dark-green multitudes of cucumbers, the red apples of his garden, the wild, abundant berries of all kinds and colours, sweet and sour, all life-giving and all pleasant to gather, and all the other numerous gifts of the woods and hills, of rivers, and lakes — these fed him and his little ones, and he "ate his bread in thankfulness".

The silky green flax with the delicate little blue flowers, rolling down the slopes of his fields to the cool water-fed dales, like a rich carpet woven by elves and fairies, lovingly clad him, his wife, his mother, and his children; and, in the hands of the woman under the rays of the eternal sun, became as white and as pure as snow.

The little flowers of the fields and meadows, the fantastical patterns of Father Frost on the small windows in the winter, all the harmonies of foliage, hues, and moods of Isis, enveloped by woman's love in mystic lore, nursed through the nights of free [Page 9] communion with Nature in her simple peasant-life, working and eating, loving and sleeping in the open air under the ever-mysterious starry heaven — all this was told by her in clever artistic adornments of garments, wrought in colours and symbols, more felt than known as a science. She would wander out into the woods and hunt for the sweet-smelling heather and the bitter, refreshing, pungent birch-leaf, and dig for the red-hearted madder and pluck the yellow golden daisy. The red was like her idea of glory. Where could she direct it but to the Almighty God presiding above ? The yellow daisy was the pure gold of her simple aspirations, the flame of her heart, like the flame of the taper in church, lifting her on its fiery tongues to the Unspeakable. And the blue of the cornflower, was it not like her humble devotion ? So what wonder that these gifts of God's garden were crystallized into vegetable dyes, since ever one remembers man's life.

All round about the peasant home man was surrounded by symbols of Isis; he read a meaning into the lofty trees and the mysterious flowers which open only for a single night; he saw things in the woods which no one else saw; he heard from his cradle of unseen forces of Nature, of mysterious beings — helpers and foes, some whom he feared, some whom he learnt to obey. It was a constant union and intermixing of real life with legends of ancient time; it was the Russian Frost born from the prehistoric eastern cradle. Else how could a pomegranate appear on a [Page 10] peasant's towel ? The modern scholar reads the pomegranate as a symbol of Royalty; and so it might be. But the Hindu's reading of it as an emblem of sorrow, as a tear, seems more real, more likely; and this is why a pomegranate is always borne before a funeral procession.

The birds ? All those feathery flocks of so many hues and voices, how did they affect the peasant

imagination ? Surely they were the most mysterious beings on earth. Ever since the Aryan race began, the birds have been the embodiment of thoughts and messages; they were the souls of the departed. Thousands of legends, one more beautiful than the other, live even now in the memory of peasants. Their lore is full of graceful suggestions in this direction.

So what more natural than to carve the beloved symbol in wood and metal, to work it in iron and silver, silk and thread ? Even now, in our twentieth century, one can find in every village and home — far enough away from a railway's levelling influence — birds carved at every end of the huge rafters, or looking down from the top of the roof, or two peacocks (symbols of life eternal) adorning an over-window, usually turned face to face towards the "Tree of Life". The bird shapes itself as a curious utensil, daily in use on the peasant table — the salt-cellar. It runs in joyous bands or Indian file over the borders of table-cloth and bed-cloths, hangs down from towels, and adorns every church curtain. It looks out mysteriously from the folds of the ancient [Page 11] brocade-grown, and shines in golden threads over the woman's face.

Even now, in the twentieth century, if one takes the trouble to go out of the beaten track to some northern peasant home — perhaps getting a bed in a little attic, called in Russia a "light room", and finding a collection of ancient garments on the wall, under a blue linen cover — one is struck with all this living history of human life, thought and symbolism, all the hidden, unspoken beauty of a poet's heart. It is a revelation ! Every stitch seems to be put in with a blessing, with a smile, put as a mother puts the last touch to her little darling's attire, lovingly, gently. Aye, those people felt beauty. They loved to wear beautifully made garments; they seemed never to have grudged the time nor the efforts to make every piece of clothing a true poem. It suited so well the home, the field, the work. The elaborate making of it suited the long winter evenings. It was an elevation of the soul to follow the ancient religious symbols, like an all-day prayer, needed in those dark winter days, when the joyous sun shows so little and the soul is obscured through the wintry, narrow conditions. It was also a reminiscence of the splendid summer work among the green fields and fragrant trees and flowers, among all those bright colours with which a maiden likes to surround herself. No wonder this winter work was always made in social gatherings and accompanied with songs. All life then was a Fairy Tale, all Fairy Tales were life. They were one.

[Page 12] And now for the stealthy approach of the thief, the enemy, the destroyer of all this picturesque life ? How obnoxious a task to write a history of destruction ! Yet it is necessary, as there are many yet who do not see the fiend under the mask of "civilisation", "improvement", "growth of industry", "accumulation of a Nation's wealth ". A modern destroyer must be attractive, or else he could not succeed. He came very softly; he imitated one who wished well, wished light and happiness.

At first he brought machines. Thousands found work in those new factories. Fathers and brothers and husbands went there first.

It seemed hard to part for years, hard for the women to do all the men's work besides their own; it seemed hard never to hear from them, ever expecting a thunder message of death or accident, to dream of broken ties, of temptations; but more and more efforts were made. Then they returned, those first pioneers.

Ah ! in what a strange way ! changed to a degree! Nothing in the village was good enough; their very

wives and sweethearts no more lovable and desirable — only stupid village folks. The simple fare, the bast shoes, the sober daily work — all this was stupid. Earnings? Yes, some brought nearly enough to pay the taxes, hardly enough to pay the damage caused by the lack of the man's share in work. And then they all wanted to show off; they had to buy in town modern garments, and walk through the street with the new-fangled harmonica, and shout in a [Page 13] half-drunken voice the new "fashionable" songs inspired by the factory. Ah well, it was almost a blessing when the short holidays ended and the men returned to their factories again. But the seed was planted. Soon after, women found their way to the factories. Who knows where the call came from? whether from the bits of town finery, in which the country maiden thought she looked "almost like a lady"; or from the great hunger for freedom, for her own sweet will; or the mysterious attraction of a new, unknown life, the breaking down of old traditions, new ways, new clothes, a new moral code altogether. So women followed men. Most of them found more than they had bargained for. They lived a hell of a life; these healthy country flowers soon fell an easy prey to the towns. Who was there to protect and love them for their own sake? to respect their womanhood and motherhood? Huddled together were men, women, and maidens, all together in a heap of misled humanity, no one to give compassion, only to blame and condemn! How could it be otherwise? Intolerably long hours, low pay, unexpected fines, a mysterious grinding and pressing of all there was in them of life, womanhood, truth. All ground together, exhausted and thrown out — a factory's "waste". What was the effect of this second exodus on the village life?

More exhaustion, more hopelessness, more despair, less and less strength in work. And then, after years, the debauched, diseased, exhausted wanderers came home one by one, to sponge on the remainder [Page 14] of the family, to curse and drink an ignoble death, leaving consternation and dumb suffering behind.

What then has to be done to re-establish justice manhood, happiness, poetry of life? Can we not see the broken law? What is there to do but to give the peasant — wherever he may live, on the shores of the Volga, or of the sacred Ganges, in the Highlands of Scotland, or in the Emerald Isle — the land; the free possession of the land by the tiller of it?

I hear many, many voices violently calling me a Utopian, a madcap. How can this be, where the State must be the legal owner, and the regulation of the laws? How very unpractical to wish an artist, preacher, a musician, a writer, to give their best for the sake of service! How can they live? They will perish of starvation. Absurd and ridiculous!

Aye, friends, I am only one of you. I have no magic means to accomplish miracles, but the Truth I have. If we aim at truth, happiness, love, we must make sacrifices, every one of us, rich and poor, influential and humble. We must supply the conditions for the miracle to happen. We must nurse this ideal deep in our hearts; forget the buying and selling of our spiritual gifts; give, give freely as it was given to us freely, and lovingly. Only then shall we hear real music, see inspired works of art see happy faces, and the colossal army of unemployed receding into the dark pages of history. Only then will our daily life become heaven.

[Page 15] I hear also a few half-sympathetic voices of those who have long thought the same thoughts, nursed the same ideals. This golden age may come, I hear them say, but, after many generations, after long evolution of mankind; neither we nor our children and grand-children may see it accomplished.

Against this let me plead. Truly, if we and our children will for ever remain passive, feebly folding our hands before the great task, sinking down at the roadside in a hopeless despair, then indeed can we have no hope of conquering the dragon which we have created by ourselves by this very indolence and self-indulgence. The time is ripe for rising up against the evil, so as not to let it get more and more the better of us. Is it not bad enough as it is ? Shall we wait for more and more suffering to be sent to us to bring us to our senses, to our duty ?

And then, is not all this misery really only a bogey ? Take to pieces the greatest of modern evils, the injustice of one being sick and helpless from overwhelming richness, the other sick and helpless from lowest poverty. What is it all made of ? Simply ignorance, greediness, *selfishness*. There is really no organic impossibility of re-establishing justice. As soon as we realise what Brotherhood is, we shall feel revulsion against our own crime, then the only solution, no longer difficult but desirable and lovable, will be to give up all unearned privileges, to share, to give, to be one of the Brothers.

Let us begin in a very small way, in little groups of Justice and Service. Let us unite in these efforts [Page 16] wherever we happen to live, and do our duty to our neighbours. One of these groups has been started by the International Union of Workers on the 9th July, 1910.