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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

LIBERTY, EQUALITY,
FRATERNITY.

BY

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LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY.

FREEDOM, JUSTICE, BROTHERHOOD : such, in other words, is the legend which is inscribed on the Republican banner, which is the motto on the Republican shield. With these words gleaming on her brow, Republican France fought and conquered ; with this war-cry ringing from her lips, Republican France unsheathed the sword which struck at the tyrants of the people, and at "the priests of an evil faith." Alas ! that France, maddened by oppression, and by most cruel outrage, blinded with furious hate and passionate indignation, conscious that she was strong enough to defy her gaolers, allowed herself to be betrayed by the emissaries of monarchs, and permitted some of her citizens to be bribed by English coin, until the golden letters were tarnished with blood, and their brightness shone lurid through a mist of terror. And yet France—glorious in spite of her madness and of the despair of her anguished fear—France clung fast to the grandest thought ever struck out of the human soul : men are free ; men are equal ; men are brothers. The shame of the Revolution we fling back on her tyrants ; on the kings who had made France their playground, and had rioted while the people were starving ; on the nobles who, evil courtiers, fluttered round an evil monarch, and wrung from the peasants' food the money for their feasting, and took from the poor man's home its brightest ornaments, the honour of his wife, and the purity of his daughter ; on the Church, whose priests were corrupt, and whose Bishops were the worst of a bad court, foul with the double foulness of a hypocrisy which knelt to God in order the better to rob Man. On these be the disgrace of the Reign of Terror, of the massacres of September. These men had taught the people that Liberty meant the power to grasp at everything which gratified the whim of the moment ; that Equality meant that, when possible, those above should be dragged down to a lower level ; that Fraternity meant that brother should slay the brother and betray the sister. Little wonder

that the evil seed bore evil fruit, and that Republican France did not shake off at once the ingrained habits of France Monarchical. Yet at the worst she did not torture her victims, as the Monarchy had tortured Damiens; or commit them to long-drawn agony, as the Monarchy did with its *lettres de cachet*; the massacres of September were scarce so bloody as the massacre of St. Bartholomew, or the guillotine so devouring as the *dragonnades* of Louis. True, the Republic shed the blood of nobles, while the Monarchy shed only the blood of the people; *there* is the secret of the execrations that arise against the Revolution, and of the hatred which blackens it and defames. In spite of her faults and her errors, the Republic held fast to the thought embodied in her motto; she was based on principles that were pure and strong; her creed was noble, even though muttered by lips that were red with blood. And to-day we repeat it, we Republicans, enthusiasts, dreamers, as men call us, we proclaim that the words are true, that the thought is perfect; we own as the ideal we worship, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity."

It is well, however, that we should attach to each word of our motto a clear and distinct meaning, so that we may never be led away into making an indefensible statement, or be betrayed into a foolish and untenable position. What is Liberty? Not, as some seem to fancy, the power to impose upon others a political constitution of which they do not approve, or a form of Government which they do not desire. Not the fact that our own opinion is uppermost, and our own ideas triumphant. Not the discovery that we have grown strong enough to bend the wills of others to our will, and to make the world as we would wish to see it. Liberty means that every individual is left perfectly free to follow his own will, to pursue his own objects in his own fashion, with no limit whatsoever imposed upon him by others; this complete freedom being bounded only by the equally complete freedom of every one of his neighbours. Nothing less than this is liberty; nothing more than this is possible. This liberty is the birthright of every man and of every woman. The right to life comes with the fact of birth; and life implies something more than mere existence; it implies the right to exercise every physical and every mental faculty, to grow, to develop, to become perfect. No one has a right to maim another's body; all admit this; and yet men claim a right to maim the faculties of another, to break his mental

arms, and to stunt his mental growth. No man can exercise his faculties to the fullest extent unless he has complete freedom to do so; but no man has a greater right to complete freedom than his fellow; and, therefore, we are driven to the conclusion that every individual has a right to complete freedom of action, but that he has no right to infringe on the complete freedom of any one else. Liberty, then, implies the right to live the fullest and happiest life of which the individual is capable by the constitution with which he is born into the world; it implies the right to property, to all which the individual has acquired for himself by his own skill and his own power, provided that, in acquiring it, he has not trespassed on his neighbours either by force or by fraud; it implies the right to make what contracts or arrangements he pleases with other individuals, provided, again, that the contract contains nothing which trenches on the rights of other parties. The free man is king of himself, but he is ruler of none other; self-respecting, he must respect the rights of others; jealous of his own liberty, he must be equally jealous of the liberty of every one else; stern defender of his own dignity, he must equally sternly repress any personal inclination, or any inclination of the many, to injure the same dignity which is in each individual alike. There is no picture of a nation possible to imagine which is sublimer than this: a nation of men and women, each free to develop into that beautiful variety which is one of the marvels and the glories of Nature, each a law to himself, each the defender of the liberty of each, strong and dignified as only free citizens can be, with the strength which grows from self-confidence and from confidence in others, with the dignity which is born of the knowledge that he who lives on the highest level he can reach, deserves the respect of his own heart, and wins the respect of all who surround him.

Equality is a word which is used as carelessly and as lightly as Liberty, and with as little thought of its only possible meaning. Equal in natural endowments, equal in possibilities of achievement, equal in physical and in mental strength, equal in moral virility, men are *not*; in this sense they are not born equal, in this sense they never can be equal; this equality is nowhere found in Nature, for throughout her mighty realms there is an endless variety, a marvellous interweaving of higher and lower elements, but never a dead level of equality, wherein none is afore or after other,

none is greater or less than another. As a simple matter of fact, does any one pretend that men can be born equal in power and in possibilities? Take the children of drunken and unhealthy parents, born with enfeebled nerves, with stunted limbs, with dwarfed brain and diseased blood; take the child of hardy, sound, and temperate parents, with strong round limbs, and well-strung muscles, and all the bright vitality of young new life thrilling and bounding within him; are the two babes born equal? Could they be equal under any possible system of government? Let them be born, if you will, where waves the flag of a true Republic, and let no factitious superiority raise the one over the other; let each have a fair chance, and let neither be unjustly weighted; but Nature, before birth, has handicapped the one, and there is no equality between them. It may be pleaded that where equality was recognised and taught, *there* drunkenness and criminality would have fewer victims, and that then our poor little ones, foredoomed to misery and vice, would be one of the horrors of the past, no longer to be found in England. Take it that so it would be, as to a great extent it would be, although no glory of governmental purity and nobility can raise men without the will of men to raise themselves; take it so, because the ideal Republic is not possible until the men and women who *are* the Republic have grown into true manhood and true womanhood, and have left behind the weaknesses of childhood; yet, even then, no absolute equality will be found; some brains will be larger than others, and some bodies stronger than others; never will man be as the work of a craftsman, turned out by the dozen from the same mould. What, then, does Equality mean, when we place it in our Trinity of Hope and of Love? Is it only an empty word without meaning, with the false jingle of which we seek to deceive, babbling a falsehood which can never be a truth? Not so; Equality has a meaning which makes it worthy of its high place, mid-way between the Freedom and the Brotherhood of Man. Equality is Justice; absolute Justice to all alike; Justice which denies to none the right which is his; Justice which gives to none a right which is not his. Equality means that in rights, all men are equal; that before the law, all men are equal; that in law-given opportunities, all men are equal; that in advantages bestowed, all men are equal. It means that in life's race none shall start in artificial advance of another; that, although strength, and agility,

and endurance must tell in the race itself, yet the racers shall be placed equal at the starting-post; that the superiority must be *in the runner*, and not gained by an advantage in the position from which he begins the race. Equality implies also that men shall really be born more equal than they are at present, because from our present inequalities, from our swollen wealth on the one side and from our ghastly poverty on the other, we actually labour to increase the slighter inequalities which Nature would produce, and we literally breed an inferior race with which to fill our workhouses and our gaols. Where equality of right is recognised, we shall gradually decrease inequalities of Nature, and we shall raise the race itself to a higher level, until, in the march upwards, until, in the developments of a more glorious Humanity, the poorest and the lowest in those happier times will be the superiors of the noblest and the proudest of our heroes of to-day.

There remains Fraternity: Fraternity, without which no Liberty is possible, except the fierce liberty of the beast of prey, living alone and in enmity with all; Fraternity, without which no Equality can exist, unless it be an equality of barbarism, where each lives by himself and through himself, and owes nought to his fellow. For Fraternity none need plead in theory, although we trample it under our feet in our daily practice; all acknowledge the beauty of brotherly love, and all would gladly extend its sway; many are careless of Liberty, and few seek for Equality, but all would raise an altar to Fraternity, where the smiling goddess might sit, garlanded in flowers, with the child Love in her arms, with the moon Peace at her feet, and clothed with the sun of Joy. And brotherhood may be cultured among us, yet more easily than Freedom and Justice; it is the hand which shall pluck the others, it is the magic wand which shall create them. Fraternity binds us together, each to each; fraternity is the strong cord which shall give to one the power of the whole. Liberty and Equality can only be won by *combined* effort, and combination is only possible as brotherhood is recognised and felt. This principle can be acted upon and spread by each of us: in our homes, in our lives, we can show its beauty; by the genial word and the helpful act; by the mere cordial clasp of the hand, which recognises the brotherhood of the labourer as reverently as that of the noble; by the steady refusal to deny the right of the lowest and most degraded, and the constant readiness

to own the brotherhood and sisterhood of those whom the world makes outcasts ; by crushing down jealousy and by following true greatness loyally ; by working hand-in-hand with others to further every noble cause ; by joyful self-sacrifice for the common good, and glad free labour for the benefit of all, we may so spread the principle of Fraternity in our ranks that, by the force of unity among us, we may stand all-powerful for attack, and may wrest Liberty from the grasp of oppressors, and erect the statue of Equality on the ruins of privilege and favouritism. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity : it is our motto, our cry, our badge. As the Christian wears the cross, and the Mahommedan is known by the crescent, so might Republicans be known by this symbol of their creed ; engraven on the ring, on the locket, on the ornament, it might speak with silent eloquence of the hope which we struggle to realise, of the faith in which we work, of the aspirations by which we live ; and, dead, it might hallow our tombs, as the sacred ideal to which we strove to conform our lives, and as the promise of the dawn of a gladder to-morrow, which shall be won for those who come after us by our labour or by our deaths.

