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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

THE LEGALISATION
OF
FEMALE SLAVERY IN ENGLAND.

BY ANNIE BESANT.

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THE first annual meeting of the "British, Continental, and General Federation for the Abolition of Government Regulation of Prostitution" was lately held at the Westminster Palace Hotel, and was largely attended by friends of the movement from all parts of England, from France, and from Switzerland. M. Loyson, better known as Father Hyacinthe, was to have been present, but a severe attack of bronchitis chained him to his room; M. de Pressensé, another well-known French speaker, was, however, there to take his place, together with M. Aimé Humbert, a gentleman whose talent appears to lie in organisation and in work more than in speech. The long-sustained labor of the Society for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts is well-known to our readers; many of them may not, however, be aware of the late extension of the sphere of their work, consequent on the thought and toil of their noble-hearted missionary, Mrs. Josephine E. Butler. The narrative of her crusade through Europe in the bitter cold, through France, into Italy, into Switzerland, over the Jura in the depth of winter, now lies before us, and is the record of a heroism equalled by few women, or by few men either. (The title of the book is "The New Abolitionists", price half-a-crown, and it well deserves careful perusal.) Undaunted by failure, unwearied by defeat, loyal in spite of taunts, brave in spite of threats, gallant-hearted in face of a misery and an evil which might well drive the boldest to despair, Mrs. Butler sets us all an example by which we should strive to profit. Societies have been formed in all

directions in France, Switzerland, and Italy, and these are now federated together into one body, sworn to destroy the recognition and encouragement of prostitution by the State.

Reaction from Christian cant upon this subject, and the rightful recognition of the sacredness and dignity of human nature, physical as well as mental, have to a great extent prejudiced many of the Secular party against the society agitating for repeal; the unwise and indelicate proceeding of scattering wholesale—so that they fell into the hands of the youth of both sexes—a number of tracts and leaflets dealing with medical details and with terrible crimes, the perusal of which by young girls and boys is about as wholesome as the reading of the *Police News*, roused a feeling of bitter indignation against those whose names appeared as leaders of the repeal movement, although they were very likely utterly ignorant of the follies perpetrated by unwise coadjutors. This phase fortunately seems to have disappeared; and it is hardly necessary to say that there is nothing in the speeches made at the meetings of the society to which the most prudish could object, unless, indeed, they object to the question being dealt with at all. Should this position be taken, surely it is then well to remind such that the discussions to which they object only become necessary through the existence of the evil attacked, and that the lack of modesty lies in the commission of the evil, and not in the endeavor to rescue the victims of it. When men of the world angrily object to women touching such a subject, they should remember that if they really respected the modesty and purity of women no such subject would be in existence, and that to those who gain nothing by the perpetuation of prostitution their loud indignation looks very much like the angry dread of a slave-owner who fears that the abolitionist preacher may possibly, sooner or later, deprive him of the services of his human property. I assert that the Secular party, as a whole, has a duty with regard to this subject, which it somewhat fails to discharge; a duty towards the promotion of national morality, of national health; and a duty also of asserting the sacredness of the individual liberty of women as well as of men, the inalienable rights of each over his or her own person.

It is perfectly true that marriage is different as regarded from the Secularist and from the Christian point of view. The Secularist reverences marriage, but he regards marriage as something far higher than a union "blessed" by a minister; he considers, also, that marriage should be terminable, like any other contract, when it fails in its object, and becomes injurious instead of beneficial; he does not despise human passion, or pretend that he has no body; on the contrary, reverencing nature, he regards physical union as perfecting the union of heart and mind, and sees in the complete unity of marriage the possibility of a far higher and nobler humanity than either man or woman can attain in a state of celibacy. But, surely, in proportion to our admiration for this true marriage, and our reverence for the home which it builds up, and which forms the healthy and pure nursery for the next generation of citizens, must be our pain and our regret when we come face to face with prosti-

tution. By prostitution I mean simply and solely physical union sold by one sex and bought by the other, with no love, no respect, no reverence on either side. Of this, physical degradation and mental degradation are the invariable accompaniments: just as intoxication may be sometimes indulged in without leaving perceptible and permanent bad effects, but, persisted in, destroys body and brain, so may sexual irregularity be practised for a time with little apparent injury, but, persisted in, destroys as fatally as intoxication. This is no matter of theory, it is simply a matter of observation; individuals whose lives are irregular, nations where prostitution is widespread, lose stamina, virility, physical development, the whole type becoming degraded. It is urged that "man's physical wants must be satisfied, and therefore prostitution is a necessity". Why *therefore*? It might as well be argued, man's hunger must be appeased, and therefore theft of food is a necessity. The two things have no necessary connexion with each other. Does prostitution promote the national health? If so, why this necessity for legislation to check the spread of contagious diseases? Those diseases spring from sexual irregularities, and are an outraged Nature's protest against the assertion that prostitution is the right method of providing for the sexual necessities of man. As surely as typhoid results from filth and neglect, so does the scourge of syphilis follow in the wake of prostitution. These unfortunate women who are offered up as victims of man's pleasure, these poor white slaves sold for man's use, these become their own avengers, repaying the degradation inflicted on them, and spreading ruin and disease among those for whose wants they exist as a class. Mrs. Butler truly writes: "You can understand how the men who have riveted the slavery of women for such degrading ends become, in a generation or two, themselves the greater slaves; not only the slaves of their own enfeebled and corrupted natures, but of the women whom they have maddened, hardened, and stamped under foot. Bowing down before the unrestrained dictates of their own lusts, they now bow down also before the tortured and fiendish womanhood *which they have created*. . . . They plot and plan in vain for their own physical safety. Possessed at times with a sort of stampede of terror, they rush to International Congresses, and forge together more chains for the dreaded wild beast they have so carefully trained, and in their pitiful panic build up fresh barricades between themselves and that womanhood which they proclaim to be a 'permanent source of sanitary danger'." Mrs. Butler was writing from Paris, where the system is carried out which we have in England in only a few towns. If any one doubts the reality of this natural retribution, let him go and watch the streets where many of these poor ruined creatures may be found, and there see what women are when transformed into prostitutes—a source of disease instead of health, of vice instead of purity. Each one might have been the centre of a happy home, the mother of brave men and women who would have served the Fatherland, and we have made them *this*.

National morality and national health go hand-in-hand; a vicious nation will be a weak nation, and when a government begins to deli-

berately license women for the purposes of prostitution, it has taken the first step towards the ruin of the nation it administers. Louis Napoleon made Paris a sink of impurity; when the struggle came, the working-classes only—whose circumstances preserved them from gross excesses—were fit to fight for France. When the license system has had a fair trial, and the danger spreads and spreads, the government finds itself burdened with a class of women it has formed and certificated; and despairing of repressing disease by simple licensing, it begins to gather the women into houses, licensed also by itself; abroad, in England's colonies, these houses are licensed by England's rulers, and in France, in Italy, and elsewhere, they are found in most cities. Thus government becomes saddled with the supervision of a vast and organised system of prostitution, and struggles vainly against the evils resulting from it. In Italy, the government draws money from this source, and the shame of Italy's daughters and the profligacy of her sons are made a source of national revenue. And what is the result? simply that these houses become *foci* of vice, demoralising the youth of the country. "Pastor Borel testified to having seen schoolboys entering these haunts of patented vice, with their satchels on their backs." Well might we ask, with the old Roman Consul, Postumius: "Can ye think that such youths are fit to be made soldiers? That wretches brought out of the temple of obscenity could be trusted with arms? That those contaminated with such debaucheries could be the champions for the chastity of the wives and children of the Roman people?" Profligates can never be made into sturdy citizens; muscles enervated by the embraces of purchased women will never be strung to heroism; a vicious nation will never be a nation of freemen. Then, in the name of the liberty we have won, of the glory of England, in the hope of the coming Republic, we are surely bound to protest against the introduction of a system among us that has degraded every nation in which it has been tried, which has only got, as yet, one foot upon our shores, and which, if we were true to our duty, we might easily drive from our English soil before it has time to sap the strength of our men and to destroy the honor of our name.

It still remains to see how this legislation is consonant with individual liberty; how it is touched by the question of a standing army; and how the evil of prostitution may be met and overcome.

I have already urged that no repressive Acts will destroy disease in a community where prostitution is encouraged, and that the wide prevalence of prostitution is ruinous to the physique of a nation; the admitted failure of regulation abroad, and the more and more complete control demanded for the police over the unfortunate women sacrificed to the "necessities of men", prove, beyond the possibility of denial, that no eradication of disease is to be hoped for unless the registered women be given over thoroughly to continual supervision, and be literally made slaves, equally obedient to the call of the doctor who heals and to that of the man who infects, holding their bodies at the hourly order of each class, with no right of self-possession, no power of self-rule permitted to them. I challenge this claim, made in

the name of the State, over one class of its citizens, and I assert that the sacred right of individual liberty is grossly and shamefully outraged by this interference of government, and that, therefore, every soldier of liberty is bound to rise in protest against the insult offered to her. No more inalienable right exists than the right of the individual to the custody of his own person; in a free country none can be deprived of this right save by a sentence given in open court, after a jury of his peers has found him guilty of a crime which, by the laws under which he lives, is punished by restriction of that liberty; so jealously is this right guarded, however, even in the criminal whose full exercise of it is temporarily suspended, that the limits within which it may be touched are carefully drawn; even in the prison-cell the felon has not lost all right over himself, and his personal liberty is only restricted on the points where the law has suspended it. No official may dare to compel a criminal to labor, for instance, unless compulsion to labor is part of the judicial sentence. Firm and strong lies the foundation stone of liberty. *No citizen's personal liberty may be interfered with, unless proof of guilt justifying that interference be tendered in open court, and every citizen has a right to demand that open trial if he be arrested by any officer of the law.* This is the foundation stone which is rudely upset by the Contagious Diseases Acts. Under them women are arrested, condemned, and sentenced to a terrible punishment, without any open accusation or public trial; by simple brute force they are compelled to submit, despite their pleading, their cries, their struggles; they have no redress, no assistance; they are degraded both in their own sight and in the sight of all who deal with them; a free woman is deprived by force of the custody of her own body, and all human right is outraged in her person—and for what? in order that men may more safely degrade her in the future, and may use her for their own amusement with less danger to themselves. A number of citizens are deprived of their natural rights in order that other citizens may profit by their loss; and the State, the incarnation of justice, the protector of the rights of all, dares thus to sacrifice the rights of some of its members to the pleasure of others. It is idle to urge that these women are too degraded to have any rights; the argument is too dangerous for men to use; for if the women are too degraded, the men who make and keep them what they are are partners of their degradation; if the women are brutalised, only brutalised men can take pleasure in their society; every harsh word cast at these poor victims recoils with trebled force on the head of those who not only seek their companionship, but actually pay for the privilege of consorting with them.

But not only is liberty outraged by this intrusion on individual self-possession, but it is still further trampled under foot by the injustice perpetrated. Two citizens commit a certain act; the law punishes one by seizure, imprisonment, disgrace; it leaves the other perfectly free. No registration of women would be necessary if the other sex left women to themselves; no disease could be spread except by the co-operation of men. By what sort of justice, then, does the law seize one only of two participators in a given action? If it be pleaded

that individual liberty may be overborne by social necessities—an argument which does not really admit of being used in this matter—then the “good of society” demands the arrest, imprisonment, and examination of both parties; it can serve no useful purpose to allow unhealthy men to propagate disease among healthy women. If men have the right to demand the protection of the law, why should women be deprived of that same protection? If so necessary for the safety of men, why not necessary for the safety of women? Is it not, really, far more needed among the men, for, if a married man should contract disease, he may infect his innocent wife and his unborn children? Surely the State should interfere for the protection of these; and any man found in a house of ill-fame, or consorting with a prostitute, should be at once arrested, be compelled to prove that he is not married, and has no intention of being so; and, failing such proof, should be examined, and kept in hospital, if need be, until perfectly cured. The Acts would be very rapidly repealed in St. Stephen’s if all their provisions were carried out justly, on both sexes alike. “Men would not submit to it.” Of course they would not, if one gleam of manhood remained in them; and neither would women, with any sense of womanhood, submit to it, if they were not bound hand and foot by the triple cord of ignorance, weakness, and starvation. Poor, pitiful sufferers, trampled on by all, till the sweet flower of womanhood is crushed out for evermore, and only some faint breath of its natural fragrance now and then arises to show how sweet it might have been if left to grow unbruised. In the name, then, of Liberty outraged, in the name of Equality disregarded, we claim the repeal of these one-sided Acts, even if the bond of Fraternity prove too weak to hold men back from this cruelty inflicted on their sisters.

But, it is urged, with a celibate standing army, prostitution is a physical necessity. Then, if an institution lead to disease, deterioration of physique, and moral and mental injury, destroy the institution which breeds these miseries, instead of trying to kill its offspring one by one. A large standing army is unnecessary; the enforcement of celibacy is a crime. Of course, if a number of young and healthy men are taken away from home, kept in idleness, and deprived of all female society, immorality must necessarily result from such an unnatural state of things. The enforcement of celibacy on vigorous men always results in libertinage, whether among celibate priests or celibate soldiers. But the natural desires of these men are not rightfully met by the State supplying them with a number of licensed women; to do that is to treat them simply like brutes, and thereby to degrade them; it is to teach them that there is nothing holy in love, nothing sacred in womanhood; it is to change the sacrament of humanity into an orgie, and to pollute the consecration of the future home with the remembrance of a parody of love. With a celibate standing army prostitution *is* a necessity, and I know of no reason why we should look at facts as we should like them to be, instead of facts as they are; but a celibate standing army is *not* a necessity. The true safeguard of a free nation is not a large standing army; rather is it a well-organised militia, regularly drilled and trained, whose home-

ties and home-interests will, in case of honorable war, nerve each arm with double strength, and string each muscle with the remembrance of the home that is threatened by the foe. The hero-armies of history are not the armies which idle in peace, and have nought in common with the citizens; such armies are the pet toys of aristocratic generals, and are easily turned against the people by tyrants and by ambitious soldiers; but the hero-armies are the armies of citizens, less dainty in dress, less exact in marching, less finished in evolutions, but men who fight for home and wife, who draw sword in a just quarrel, but to please no prince's whim; men like Cromwell's Ironsides, and like Hampden's yeomen; men who are terrible in war because lovers of peace; men who can never be defeated while living; men who know how to die, but not how to yield.

What remedy is there for prostitution other than that attendant upon a celibate standing army? So far as the women are concerned, the real remedy for prostitution is to give women opportunities of gaining fairly paid employment. By far the greater number of prostitutes are such *for a living*. Men are immoral for their amusement; women are immoral for bread. Ladies in the upper classes have no conception of the stress of agony that drives many a forlorn girl "on the streets". If some of them would try what life is like when it consists of making shirts at three halfpence each (cotton not provided), and starving on the money earned, they would perhaps learn to speak more gently of "those horrid women". Lack of bread makes many a girl sell herself, and, once fallen, she is doomed. On the one side are self-respect, incessant toil, starvation; on the other side prostitution, amusement, plenty. We may reverence the heroic virtue that resists, but we can scarcely dare to speak harshly of the frailty that submits. Remunerative employment would half empty the streets; pay women, for the same work, the same wage that men receive; let sex be no disqualification; let women be trained to labor, and educated for self-support; then the greatest of all remedies will be applied to the cure of prostitution, and women will cease to sell their bodies when they are able to sell their labor.

The second great remedy, as regards the women, is that society should make recovery more possible to them. Many a young and loving girl is betrayed through her love and her trust; having "fallen" she is looked down upon by all; deserted, she is aided by none; everybody pushes her away, and she is driven on the streets, and in despair, reckless, hopeless, she becomes what all around call her, and drearily sinks to the level assigned her by the world. Meanwhile her seducer passes unrebuked, and in the families where she would not be admitted as scullery-maid he is welcomed as fit husband for the daughter of the house. That which has ruined her and many others is only being "a little wild" in the circles where he moves. A public opinion which should be just is sorely needed. The act so venial in the man cannot be a crime in the woman, and if, as it is said, men *must* be immoral, then those who are necessary to them ought not to be looked down upon for their usefulness. We ask for justice equal to both sexes: punishment for both, if their intercourse be a crime against society;

immunity for both, if it be a necessary weakness. We hold up one standard of purity for both, and urge the nobility of sexual morality on man and woman alike.

More reasonable marriage laws would also tend to lessen prostitution. Much secret immorality is caused by making the marriage tie so unfairly stringent as it is to-day; people who are physically and mentally antagonistic to each other are bound together for life, instead of being able to gain a divorce without dishonor, and to be set free, to find in a more congenial union the happiness they have failed to find with each other. Reasonable facility of divorce would tend to morality, and would strengthen the bond of union between those who really loved, who would then feel that their true unity lay in themselves more than in the marriage ceremony, and was a willing, ever renewed mutual dedication instead of a hard compulsion.

But at the root of all reform lies the inculcation of a higher morality than at present prevails. We need to learn a deeper reverence for nature, and therefore a sharper repugnance for all disregard of physical and moral law. Young men need to learn reverence for themselves and for the physical powers they possess, powers which tend to happiness when rightly exercised, to misery and degradation when abused. They need also to learn reverence for the humanity in those around them, and the duty of guarding in every woman everything which they honor in mother, wife, and daughter. If a man realised that in buying a prostitute he was buying the womanhood of those he loved at home, he would shrink back from such sacrilege as from the touch of a leper. Woman should be man's inspiration, not his degradation; woman's love should be his prize for noble effort, not his purchased toy; the touch of a woman's lips should breathe of love and not of money, and the clasp of the wife should tell of passionate devotion and supremest loyalty, and never be mingled in thought with the memory of arms which were bought by a bribe, of caress that was paid for in gold.

ONE PENNY.