

Josephine Butler's Legacy

An Appeal to Women

By SIR S. H. SCOTT, Bt.

THIS year we are celebrating the centenary of Josephine Butler's birth, paying tribute to her life and work. Yet her work is but half accomplished. What she strove against remains—the one great sore of our social system.

Slavery has been abolished; prisons have become humane; children are no longer slaves in mines. One world-wide evil remains as a blot on civilisation—the presence of the prostitute and its inevitable train of cruelty and disease.

It differs from the problem of drink, because, terrible as may be the ultimate consequences of drunkenness to others, it is something which in the first case is the concern of the individual. A drunkard may wreck his own life, but he does not demand a victim. The man who hires a prostitute is working his will upon another; it is not, like the degradation of the drunkard, something which is only the degradation of himself.

The influence of a woman like Josephine Butler remains long after her death, and it is good that we should not forget her. It is a direct conse-

quence of the revival of her memory that this has been written, for one would not from choice place one's name above an article on such a topic.

But if Josephine Butler dared so greatly, it is not for a man to shirk saying what he believes to be true.

Perhaps such an appeal as this comes better from a man, facing it from the ordinary man's point of view. But it is essentially a woman's question, and it is for the women of England to rouse themselves in Josephine Butler's memory.

Josephine Butler fought for justice and the equality of the sexes, and she was right. But the battle is only half-won, and we shall never view the question rightly until public opinion has been converted to Josephine Butler's side. Up to the eve of the Report



MRS. JOSEPHINE BUTLER.

(Reproduction of a chalk drawing by George Richmond, A.R.A., from a block kindly lent by the Association for Moral and Social Hygiene.)

of the League of Nations there were rational people asserting that registration was necessary; there are still good women who repeat the horrible old catch-words about "the oldest profession in the world" and the impossibility of checking it. They are the same people who would have maintained that slavery was a necessary

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institution, calling God and the Bible as their witnesses; the same people who would have maintained that every one would steal if a child could not be executed for theft; the same people who would have said that of course gentlemen must drink themselves under the table and would always continue to do so. They are the true pessimists, finding a "difficulty in every opportunity," inert and unwilling to join in any endeavour.

Such people, on account of their numbers, are more harmful to the progress of the world than its active enemies. They are the dead weight of apathy so difficult to move.

Obviously the problem can only be discussed very broadly here, for one side of the question is a medical one. But at least this can be said, that if any medical opinion exists holding prostitution to be necessary, it is a relic of that medical opinion against which Josephine Butler fought and won.

The sexes are not alike; that must be conceded in any demand for equality. Man as the active differs from woman as the passive, and some allowance must be made for the fact. Moreover civilization has eliminated or placed in abeyance in very many women those impulses which are still imperious in the normal man. Nor need we blind ourselves to the difficulties which the artificialities of civilization have imposed upon beings still possessed of an animal organism. They are plain, and so are the drawbacks and difficulties of our marriage system.

Accepting things as they are, we have to face the fact that the conventional restraints of civilised existence make life more difficult for the young, inheriting the mating instinct at an early age, and unable or unwilling from reasons of economics and prudence to embark on a life-long marriage in order to meet the wayward impulses of adolescence, or even of ripe manhood and womanhood. So much we must allow, but up to now no remedy has been proposed that is not worse than the disease. Nor is it likely that it will be found. There are many requirements which we must accept in return for civilisation, and restraint is one of them. In any case the problem is probably grossly exaggerated.

For the young man the recognised remedy has been Prostitution. For the young woman no such

indulgence has been allowed. Yet if the truth be stated frankly, it is probable that for a certain percentage of women the need is even greater, and the consequences of deprivation more serious. To avoid consequences which have been supposed to follow excessive self-control, the young man has been allowed to indulge himself by the aid of money—the most degrading way in which the brutal power of the purse can be used. Convention has allowed a special class of woman—not to be regarded as other women are regarded—to be at his disposal. Only the submissiveness of women in the past has tolerated such a thing. Reverse the picture, and would it have been tolerated? Would men have allowed for the sake of anaemic girls a class of hireling men to be kept for blood transfusion, supposing for the sake of argument that blood transfusion had involved the physical and moral deterioration of a class of men, treated as pariahs, despised by their own sex, and the subject of gross jests by those for whom they were sacrificed?

Supposing it to be proved (which is very doubtful) that for a few abnormal men the necessity exists, has a man the right to buy his health at such a cost to another? Are the resources of medicine and psycho-therapy so powerless? It may be that at present they are. When an acknowledged specific is at hand, science does not look for another.

Josephine Butler held that no evil could be cured by the creation of another evil. The health and sanity of a few men may be purchased (if they can be so purchased) at too high a cost.

Here, to anticipate criticism, let a word be added in parenthesis. No one who has studied the question is ignorant of the fact that some prostitutes end their lives happily married, that some are already married women, living the life from choice, that not every woman who lives by prostitution is miserable. But such exceptions count as nothing against the indictment of the system as a whole.

In point of fact what may be called the medical argument for prostitution is a very thin one. Any observer must have noted that it is not the adolescent or the young man who maintains the army of prostitutes. They are kept in existence by older and richer men, often worn out by a dissolute life. Commercialised intercourse is

unnatural and, like all sins against nature, it brings factors in its train which cannot be mentioned here.

Moreover custom is much more potent than necessity. Prostitution is prevalent in Europe in inverse ratio to the civilisation of the country. In a small Balkan town there are probably more prostitutes than can be found in the whole of London. In pre-war Russia the corridors of the hotels were crowded with them. Making every allowance for racial differences of temperament, it is clear that it is not man's physical necessities which maintain the prostitute, but an unnecessary indulgence which is more freely tolerated in some countries than others.

There are those, priding themselves on a broad-minded cosmopolitanism, who will declare that what is called "the moral standard" of this country is a convention that can be disregarded because other nations, as cultured as we, ignore it. They forget these broadminded cosmopolitans, that if they are going to compare the standards of one country with another, they must take them as a whole. The same argument would apply to a lower standard of honour, honesty, humanity and justice, to which anyone with an intimate knowledge of other countries will bear witness. It is a mistake to be unreasonably insular, but it is not broadminded to blind oneself to facts; and if we are to accept the standard of other nations, we must include the things which lie at the root of a degrading attitude towards women. We must not forget that if a Continental mother acquiesces in her son's visits to the brothel, she will also be capable (as a lady of position has been known to do) of engaging good-looking maid-servants to keep her sons at home; that a girl in a café has to regard herself as at the disposal of the regiment which frequents it; that an acquiescence in prostitution so lowers the estimation in which women are held that it is only a step further to include any woman who is unable to defend herself.

There is, in fact, something hypocritical about the delegates of the League of Nations, mostly representing states in which prostitution is freely tolerated, condemning the traffic in women. To prohibit the traffic and to connive at prostitution is as illogical as it would be to prohibit the sale

of alcoholic drink and permit its manufacture.

The Report of the League of Nations lays stress on what was always obvious — that prostitution depends on **supply and demand**. Where women are required they will be found, for it is the most profitable traffic in the world and the wiles of the trafficker will baffle any police system. Every man who hires a woman for such a purpose is increasing the demand and stimulating the traffic as surely as he would be encouraging the whiskey trade by drinking whiskey.

Prostitution will flourish in proportion as public opinion tolerates it. As Miss Alison Neilans said before the Commission on Street Offences, the presence of prostitutes in the streets is a small danger compared with a public opinion which regards prostitution as necessary.

There is no form of prostitution that will not have its effects upon the traffic as a whole. If rich men hire elegant women at a high price, they raise the price of the high-class prostitute by the inexorable law of supply and demand and thus increase the demand for the humbler prostitute that less rich men can afford. No man who hires a woman can say that he is not directly abetting the traffic.

It rests with the women of this country to say they will not tolerate this thing. There is a long way to go, for in other countries the system is far more deeply rooted. But there can be no hope for the conversion of less advanced peoples until public opinion is sound and united in the most enlightened country of Europe.

The influence of women is all-powerful. They hold sway over men at every stage of their lives, and the solution lies, not in harrying women, but in the creation of a public opinion which shall make it unthinkable for a man to employ them.

We have said nothing as to religion—and religion was the main-spring of Josephine Butler's life. To the spiritually minded, prostitution is impossible, but to those who did lip-service to religion in the past, and to those who disclaim any religious belief now, the appeal of religion is in vain.

A young man may be restrained by fear of consequences—an ignoble form of restraint—or he may be restrained by moral prohibition.

Neither is a very effective safeguard. Under a powerful impulse men will run frightful hazards, and mere prohibition gives no strength to the character. A man will stand more firmly if something else is deeply ingrained in his nature, over-riding even his lower instincts.

If women had more imagination and sense of duty they could inculcate in their men-folk and in the rising generation such an abhorrence of this vile thing that a man would not be tempted.

It is the duty of every responsible woman to read the Report of the League of Nations. We

have dwelt upon no horrors here: they may be found in the coldly-dispassionate Report, and the full horror must be realised before indignation is aroused.

As long as prostitution is accepted as inevitable, as long as it is a subject for funny stories, so long will public opinion fail to have any effect. There are some things about which no one would tolerate a jest—under no circumstances are they funny. And the bribing of a woman, with all that it entails, is one of the things that are too outrageous for jesting.

