

WAR AND THE SOCIAL EVIL.

(By Mrs A. J. Webbe.)

Owing to the war, many centres all over the country have large numbers of men massed together, thereby bringing into greater prominence and giving greater publicity than in ordinary times to the most difficult of all our social problems, the prostitution of women for men.

In one of our big towns in the South of England the Town Council had before them the following minute to discuss:—

"That in the opinion of this Committee it is desirable that the provisions of the Contagious Diseases Act of 1866 to 1869 should be re-enacted."

What are these Acts, which every civilised State is slowly but surely abolishing, as the power of the women's movement is being felt?

"At the Woman's Expense."

The Contagious Disease Act, or its equivalent State Regulation of Vice, is simply this: That a man is helped by the State to live an immoral life, with what he believes to be safety to himself against venereal disease, at the woman's expense. The prostitute (only where poor and friendless) is put on a police register, and from that day she is treated as belonging to a class apart.

The thing can be best expressed in the words of a French Sister of Mercy, who works in the St. Lazare Prison in Paris, where these women are sent as "*La chaîne du Diable*." When the woman is registered, the first and foremost condition is that once or twice a week she has to be medically examined (it is impossible here to enter into the horrors of this examination) to see if she is diseased or not. If free, she has a card, which is a license by the State to continue her trade; if diseased, she is sent to a hospital in Paris as to prison, and is a prisoner till cured. After perhaps weeks of enforced imprisonment she comes out, only probably to be reinfected the next day, as no provision whatever is made by the State to protect the woman from infection, the man who is disease being allowed to spread infection at will.

Let no one compare this state of things with treatment of ordinary infectious diseases, as is often done, because both sexes are subject to the same restrictions.

The Economic Injustice of Regulation.

Economically it is unjust, as it "snaps the last weak thread that ties the women to decent occupation," and makes her from henceforth a social pariah of the lowest order. Rescue of these women and girls in countries where vice is not licensed is possible and hopeful? rescue in countries where State regulation exists is a hundred times more difficult, because, say what we will, the law to many must always be a teacher, and it is the law that sets before many the standard of right and wrong. Therefore, how is it possible with one voice to preach continence and at the same time to license vice? In Germany at one time slot machines were placed in barracks and on board ships, where for a small coin could be purchased protective remedies; and Germany was not the only country where soldiers were taught by those in authority that, though continence was wisest, if this was impossible remedies for safety could be bought.

Has any State the right to make indulgence easier, the saving of the women more difficult, especially when there is overwhelming evidence to show that the question of prostitution is for women largely an economic one?

Wherever regulation exists you have one-sided legislation such as the following:—If a woman prostitute is seen with a young man under eighteen she is punished by imprisonment, but in most of these countries the age of consent for girls is twelve or thirteen!

The Medical Futility of It.

Innumerable are the opinions of experts on the uselessness of the Contagious Diseases Act as a preventive measure of venereal diseases. The last Medical Congress that was held in the summer of 1913 condemned it as useless, and the Local Government Board published a pamphlet in 1913 on Venereal Disease, which every man and woman should read, giving shortly the reasons of the uselessness of regulation, the first and foremost being that the patient must come in the earliest stages of disease to be cured, and that every facility must be given to make this possible. If any kind of penal treatment is in force it has been proved that no one will come to be treated till obliged, and that recourse is more often than not had to quack doctors.

Therefore, could anything be stronger against Regulation than the following:—

"If early recourse by the venereal patient to skilled treatment could be made the rule instead of the exception, I do not hesitate to say that in view of the great discoveries and improved methods of the last few years there is a prospect of stamping out venereal disease.

Such is the opinion of Dr. Johnson, the writer of the Local Government pamphlet.

Why Suffragists Oppose the C.D. Acts

Why, in fine, should women who stand for the woman's movement be against Regulation? Because more than perhaps anything else, State regulation of vice helps to keep alive the subjection of women; because it helps to keep alive an unequal moral standard, which more than anything else makes possible the White Slave Traffic; because it helps to keep alive the statement made over and over again by officials in countries where regulation is in vogue that the woman prostitute is always bad, though for man prostitution is a necessity; and, lastly, it helps to make possible statements such as were made at the Town Council mentioned before by one of the committee, who strongly urged the re-enactment of the Contagious Diseases Acts, adding that "the opposition came from women, women, women, who knew nothing of the world"!

And why is it imperative that every woman should know all that there is to be known in connection with these subjects? Simply because in the interest of our great humanity woman is going to see that her child shall have the right of being born into the world strong and healthy. Man has not seen to this, so now the motherhood of woman is coming to the rescue, and she will try to do her part in teaching man the beauty of responsibility in fatherhood such as up to the present has been unknown to him.

"There are three kinds of people in the world:

"The wills,
"The won'ts,
"The can'ts.

"The first accomplish everything, the second oppose everything, and the third fail in everything."