# We bid you be of Hope

###### W.T. Stead (The Pall Mall Gazette, July 6, 1885)

The Report of our Secret Commission will be read to-day with a shuddering horror that will thrill throughout the world. After this awful picture of the crimes at present committed as it were under the very aegis of the law has been fully unfolded before the eyes of the public, we need not doubt that the House of Commons will find time to raise the age during which English girls are protected from inexpiable wrong.

The evidence which we shall publish this week leaves no room for doubt–first, as to the reality of the crimes against which the Amendment Bill is directed, and, secondly, as to the efficacy of the protection extended by raising the age of consent. When the report is published, the case for the bill will be complete, and we do not believe that members on the eve of a general election will refuse to consider the bill protecting the daughters of the poor, which even the House of Lords has in three consecutive years declared to be imperatively necessary.

This, however, is but one, and that one of the smallest, of the considerations which justify the publication of the Report. The good it will do is manifest. These revelations, which we begin to publish to-day, cannot fail to touch the heart and rouse the conscience of the English people. Terrible as is the exposure, the very horror of it is an inspiration. It speaks not of leaden despair, but with a joyful promise of better things to come. Wir heissen euch hoffen! "We bid you be of hope!" Carlyle's last message to his country, the rhythmic with which Goethe closes his modern psalm–that is what we have to repeat today, for assuredly these horrors, like others against which the conscience of mankind has revolted, are not eternal. "Am I my sister's keeper?" that paraphrase of the excuse of Cain, will not dull the fierce smart of pain which will be felt by every decent man who learns the kind of atrocities which are being perpetrated in cool blood in the very shadow of our churches and within a stone's throw of our courts.

It is a veritable slave trade that is going on around us; but as it takes place in the heart of London, it is a scandal–an outrage on public morality–even to allude to it. We have kept silence far too long. There are a few devoted workers who have been labouring for years endeavouring to save those who might well address Gordon's homely reproach to the majority of us : "While you are eating and drinking and resting on good beds, we, and those with me, are watching by night and by day"–working against this great wrong–happy, indeed, if they escaped obloquy and abuse for endeavouring to remind us of our duty. No longer will good men be able with easy conscience to join in that indignant "Hush!" by which the evil-doers have hitherto silenced every attempt to make articulate the smothered wail that rises unceasing from the woeful under-world. There is now an end to that conspiracy of silence by which, after every inquiry, "the door was each time quickly closed upon the question, as the stone lid used to be shut down, in the Campo Santo of Naples, upon the mass of human corpses that lay festering beneath." That "stone lid " is raised now, never again, we may hope, to be closed until something has been done. Under the ruthless compulsion of publicity even those but indifferent honest will do more good than many of the most virtuous when the evil could be hidden out of sight.

That much may be done, we have good ground for hoping, if only because so little has hitherto been attempted. A dull despair has unnerved the hearts of those who face this monstrous evil, and good men have sorrowfully turned to other fields where their exertions might expect a better return. But the magnitude of this misery ought to lead to the redoubling, not to the benumbing of our exertions. No one can say how much Suffering and wrong is irremediable until the whole of the moral and religious forces of the country are brought to bear upon it. Yet, in dealing with this subject, the forces upon which we rely in dealing with other evils are almost all paralysed. The Home, the School, the Church, the Press are silent. The law is actually accessory to crime. Parents culpably neglect even to warn their children of the existence of dangers of which many learn the first time when they have become their prey. The Press, which reports verbatim all the scabrous details of the police courts, recoils in pious horror from the duty of shedding a flood of light upon these dark places, which indeed are full of the habitations of cruelty. But the failure of the Churches is, perhaps, the most conspicuous and the most complete. Christ's mission was to restore man to a semblance of the divine. The Child-Prostitute of our day is the image into which, with the tacit acquiescence of those who call themselves by His name, men have moulded the form once fashioned in the likeness of God.

If Chivalry is extinct and Christianity is effete, there is still another, great enthusiasm to which we may with confidence appeal. The future belongs to the combined forces of Democracy and Socialism, which when united are irresistible. Divided on many points they will combine in protesting against the continued immolation of the daughters of the people as a sacrifice to the vices of the rich. Of the two, it is Socialism which will find the most powerful stimulus in this revelation of the extent to which under our present social system the wealthy are able to exercise all the worst abuses of power which disgraced the feudalism of the Middle Ages. Wealth is power, Poverty is weakness. The abuse of power leads directly to its destruction, and in all the annals of crime can there be found a more shameful abuse of the power of wealth than that by which in this nineteenth century of Christian civilization princes and dukes, and ministers and judges, and the rich of all classes, are purchasing for damnation, temporal if not eternal, the as yet uncorrupted daughters of the poor? It will be said they assent to their corruption. So did the female serfs from whom the seigneur exacted the jus primæ noctis. And do our wealthy think that the assent wrung by wealth from poverty to its own undoing will avert the vengeance and the doom?

If people can only be got to think seriously about this matter progress will be made in the right direction. Evils once as universal and apparently inevitable as prostitution have disappeared. Vices almost universal are now regarded with shuddering horror by the least moral of men. Slavery has gone. A slave trader is treated as hostis humani generis. Piracy has disappeared. Intestine war is now almost unknown. Torture has been abolished. May we not hope, therefore, that if we try to do our duty to our sisters and to ourselves, we may greatly reduce, even although we never entirely extirpate, the plague of prostitution? For let us remember that–

Every hope which rises and grows broad

In the world's heart, by ordered impulse streams

From the great heart of god.

And if that ideal seems too blinding bright for human eyes, we can at least do much to save the innocent victims who unwillingly are swept into the maelstrom of vice. And who is there among us bearing the name of man who will dare to sit down any longer with folded hands in the presence of so great a wrong?http://www.attackingthedevil.co.uk/images/square.gif

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• Notice to our Readers (July 4, 1885)

• The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon Part I (July 7, 1885)

• The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon Part II (July 7, 1885)

• A Flame which shall never be Extinguished (July 8, 1885)

• The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon Part III (July 8, 1885)

• To Our Friends the Enemy (July 9, 1885)

• The Truth about our Secret Commission (July 9, 1885)

• The Siege of Northumberland Street (July 9, 1885)

• Of Good Cheer Indeed (July 10, 1885)

• The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon Part IV (July 10, 1885)

• To Our Censors (July 13, 1885)

• Rebecca Jarrett's Narrative (c. 1928)

• Passing of Rebecca Jarrett (War Cry, March 10, 1928)

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