

*To A. Babington, Dist
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L. Derry



"QUEEN AND CONSTITUTION."

Journal

AND DONEGAL AND TYRONE ADVERTISER.

Opinions of the Press.

INFANTICIDE IN ENGLAND.

(From the Daily Telegraph.)

Mr. Vivian, a magistrate for the county of Devon, has ably and opportunely suggested certain measures which he conceives might be adopted for the prevention of infanticide. It is not our present purpose to discuss the question whether the prevalence of this appalling and unnatural crime has or has not been exaggerated; nor shall we ask whether the universal dissemination of intelligence, with the excessive publicity now given to the minutest transactions of daily life from one end of the empire to the other, may not be calculated to direct public attention to every single case of child murder brought before our coroners or our magistrates, when fifty years ago a hundred base-born babies might have been made away with, without attracting any special notice beyond the district where the deed was perpetrated. The German poet Burger thought an isolated case of infanticide worthy to be the theme of a pathetic ballad; but in our own time scarcely a day elapses without producing, in a brief paragraph, at the bottom of a column in a London or local newspaper, some story far more replete with horror than "*Die Pfarrers Tochter von Tausenheim*." It is not, perhaps, that we sin more nowadays, but the printing press and the electric telegraph tell us much more than we were wont to know about each other's sins. The statistics of infanticide in England, or a comparison of their aggregate with those of the Continent and the United States, do not concern us just now; still less do we mean to inquire into the state of infant mortality at Rangoon, or follow Sir John Bowring in his ghastly revelations concerning Chinese babies who are thrown to the pigs. It is enough for us to know that infanticide does exist in our midst; that in a highly civilised and eminently Christian country there are mothers who massacre their innocent offspring; and that, almost without an exception, the victims so sacrificed are illegitimate. Whatever Chinese women, who fear that their little ones will not get a sufficiency of rice when they grow up, may be driven to do, it is certain that very few English parents, not being blind and crazy as Esther Lark, would dream of killing the baby that had been lawfully begotten. They could not do it. Even the criminal mother, as a rule, when she has once looked in her child's eyes, and put it to her bosom, would sooner be cut to pieces than do it an injury. If the statista will pay a few visits to the abodes of those whose lot it is to labour and live with them, and talk to them, they will find that in the most poverty-stricken households, where work is hardest and bread is scarcest, each additional child is oftener looked upon as a blessing than a curse, and that the most wretched toiler is as fond of his youngest infant, albeit it be the thirteenth and a cripple, as ever was the rich Numaenius with all his flocks and herds and camels, and children clad in spun silk and orient gold. Mr. Vivian's proposal is to the effect that Boards of Guardians should have a discretionary power to admit illegitimate children into the workhouse without necessarily admitting the mothers with them; the cost of maintenance being recoverable, where practicable, from one or both parents. He again suggests that it should be the duty of relieving officers to assist in obtaining orders of affiliation, and in all cases of illegitimate birth to search out the paternity, so as to prevent the burden from falling upon the union, or exclusively on the mother. As the law stands, or rather as that law is interpreted by the Poor Law Commissioners, the whole of the arrangement thus proposed is impracticable. The relief given to the child is regarded as relief afforded to the mother, and both or neither must remain in the workhouse. The object of this restriction was obviously to prevent profligate girls from converting the union-house into a virtual foundling hospital, and leaving their infants there to be brought up, or "dragged up," by strangers, while they betook themselves to a fresh career of vice. The prohibition has been only too effectual. Abandoned girls go to the workhouse to "lie in;" their presence contaminates the moral atmosphere of the place, and tends to debauch the minds of pauper girls not yet old enough to be criminal, though they can grin at the notion that Sal or Liz, their quondam schoolfellow, should come back to "have a baby;" and almost as soon as the mothers are convalescent they are, unless they have a legal settlement, turned out to shift as best they may. Undoubtedly the state of utter uncertainty into which a girl about to become a mother is thrown, as to what she is to do with her baby when it is born, drives many weak-minded creatures to infanticide. Nor is the eve of parturition the most favourable period for originating tangible schemes or drawing logical conclusions. The wretched woman falls into a state of utter perplexity and bewilderment. What is she to do with the fruit of her incontinence? Who is to take care of it? She does not know; there is nobody to tell her; so she cuts the Gordian knot by cutting her baby's throat almost as soon as it has uttered its first cry.

The scheme propounded by the Devonshire magistrate cannot, of course, be adopted without the sanction of the legislature; nor, were its authority obtained, and were workhouse officials relieved from the operation of that clause in the Poor Law Amendment Act which renders it penal for them to interfere directly or indirectly in procuring orders of affiliation, would the requisite object be gained without a simultaneous revision and broadening of the powers created by the Bastardy Laws. The paltry dole of half-a-crown a week must be largely increased. We do not say that even that pittance might be retained as a minimum; for to tell an agricultural labourer with ten shillings a week that he must pay five out of his hebdomadal wages for the support of his illegitimate child, or go to prison if he failed in keeping up his payments, would be simply dooming him to chronic ruin, and filling the goals with rustic Don Juans. It must not be forgotten that the highly penal treatment of bastardy was one of the principal features of the old Poor Laws. Clodhoppers who had seduced village lasses fled from county to county to avoid the pursuit of the parish officers. They were pounced upon at last, and if they offered to compromise the matter by marrying the victims of their profligacy, the constable took them, handcuffed, to church. The woman was treated even more brutally. She was sent to the House of Correction, and flogged. That Draconic system did no good, nor would its revival, we conceive, be of any benefit to the community. The legislators who are to revise the existing statutes—and very blundering statutes they are—must remember that they have to deal with others besides ploughmen and milkmaids. The seducer is not always a clodhopper; very often he is a mechanic earning good wages, or a clerk, or a shop-assistant. Very frequently he is what is termed a gentleman—a person of rank and wealth. Half-a-crown a week may be a sufficient mulct for Hodge; but to condemn the individuals we have just enumerated to pay such a ridiculous sum as six pounds ten shillings a year as a penalty for the illicit gratification of their passions is absolutely scandalous. Let the seducer be made to pay according to his means. Let him be made to pay, not only for the bare nutriment which his infant requires, but for its board, its maintenance, and its education, until the baby becomes a man or a woman. Let him be sued before a special assessor, and in as public a manner as possible. In suggesting these measures, we are not assuming that too free a life is unpardonable sin; the man who may happen to have a "natural" child is not necessarily an irredeemable villain. But he has injured the community, he has put it to inconvenience, and it is but fair that he should suffer accordingly. We see our way clearly to the successful operation of Mr. Vivian's scheme; only, if workhouses are to become refuges for illegitimate children, the extension of the sum to be obtained from the putative father should be insisted upon. The rich seducers should be made to pay for the poor ones. The union authorities should be put in possession of funds sufficient, not to "drag up," but to rear, maintain, and educate the children committed to their charge. Under such practical improvements, the workhouse might become, what it was originally intended to be, a place of solace for the extremely aged, the infirm and incapable, and of really industrial training for destitute youth.