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Autobiographical Sketches

Annie Besant

edited by
Carol Hanbery MacKay



Nineteenth-Century British Autobiographies

[This important edition brings Annie Besant's first autobiographical work back into print. Written before her conversion to Theosophy, *Autobiographical Sketches* details Besant's remarkable spiritual and political transformation from wife of a Christian clergyman to celebrated campaigner for Freethought, secularism, women's rights, and birth control. Carol Hanbery MacKay's splendid introduction and supplementary materials offer an illuminating context for students and scholars alike. Altogether, the volume is a major contribution to the literature of feminism, autobiography, religion, and radical politics.]

Elizabeth Miller, University of California, Davis

"'Naughty Annie' (as the press called her) has been ill-served by biographers and critics. This meticulous edition of her fascinating first foray into autobiography—before her extraordinary but quintessentially Victorian passage from secularism and Socialism to Theosophy and India—not only allows her to speak again for herself as a woman and a public figure, but, through the rich array of reviews, speeches, essays, and extended passages from her later *Autobiography*, also allows us to understand her against the full backdrop of her life and the times she helped to change."

Joss Marsh, University of Indiana

Annie Wood Besant (1847-1933) was a problematic and notorious figure in Victorian England, questioning and then breaking from the Anglican Church to become an atheist, women's rights advocate, and Freethinker. As editor of her own journal, *Our Corner*, she responded to inquiries about her life experiences by serializing her life story, which was published in 1885. After providing a vivid account of her trial, along with Charles Bradlaugh, for the right to publish birth control literature, Besant recounts her heartbreaking trial for custody of her daughter.

With a critical and historical introduction by Carol Hanbery MacKay, this Broadview Edition includes comparative passages from *An Autobiography*, written in 1893 after Besant's conversion to Theosophy. Contemporary reviews, excerpts from publications about issues such as Socialism and trade unionism, and additional examples of Besant's writing about secularism and labour reform are also included.

ISBN 978-1-55111-448-4



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Cover: "Annie Besant," 1868.

Photographer unknown.

www.broadviewpress.com

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Nineteenth-Century British Autobiographies
series editors: Janice Carlisle and Linda H. Peterson



Photograph of Annie Besant taken in 1885, by H.S. Mendelssohn, 27, Cathcart Road, South Kensington, London, S.W.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
SKETCHES

Annie Besant

edited by Carol Hanbery MacKay



Nineteenth-Century British Autobiographies

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Besant, Annie Wood, 1847-1933

Autobiographical sketches / Annie Besant ; edited by Carol Hanbery MacKay.

(Nineteenth-Century British Autobiographies)

First published in book form in 1885.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-55111-448-4

1. Besant, Annie Wood, 1847-1933. 2. Women social reformers—Great Britain—Biography. 3. Women authors, English—Biography—Biography. 4. Women's rights—Great Britain—History—19th century. I. MacKay, Carol Hanbery. II. Title.

BP585.B3A3 2009 303.48'4092 C2009-901292-8

Broadview Editions

The Broadview Editions series represents the ever-changing canon of literature in English by bringing together texts long regarded as classics with valuable lesser-known works.

Advisory editor for this volume: Betsy Struthers

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This book is printed on paper containing 100% post-consumer fibre.

Typesetting and assembly: True to Type Inc., Claremont, Canada.

PRINTED IN CANADA

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Acknowledgements

This project is an outgrowth of my dual interests in women's autobiographical writing in general and the multiple careers of Annie Wood Besant in particular. That Besant chose to rewrite her life story just eight years after publishing *Autobiographical Sketches* in 1885 is itself a measure of how rapidly her life was changing, yet a comparison of this text with the later *An Autobiography* also uncovers a continuity of mind and spirit that her detractors have seldom recognized. Because *Autobiographical Sketches* has long been out of print, this comparison has been limited primarily to scholars who have access to rare book repositories. It is the goal of this edition to remedy that situation and to direct present-day readers to some of the source material that informed Besant's many areas of expertise. Seen in the context of late-nineteenth-century debates about religion, social reform, science, education, suffrage, and the law, *Autobiographical Sketches* records one woman's remarkable contributions to a series of changes that catapulted Victorian Britain into the modern world.

I can trace my own fascination with Besant's life and work to my response to the call for papers for "Awakenings: Great and Small," conducted by the South Central Conference on Christianity and Literature in 1995. Building on that comparative study of Besant's two autobiographies, I moved on to a series of forums hosted by the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers Association, which I have variously addressed on "The Multiple Deconversions of Annie Wood Besant" (1998), "From Pious to Revolutionary: The Religious Journey of the Victorian Annie Besant" (2002), and "From 'Atheist Mother' to 'Mother Besant': The Maternal Dichotomy in Annie Besant" (2006). Collaborating with my co-panelists and engaging in dialogue with other conference participants have spurred my growing awareness of Besant's achievements and complex relationships to her social and political conditions; I am especially grateful to Cheri Larsen Hoeckley, Donelle Ruwe, and Peaches Henry for their insights into the anthologizing of gender in the nineteenth century.

During the last decade of the twentieth century, my research and writing about three other nineteenth-century women of accomplishment—photographer Juliet Margaret Cameron, novelist-biographer Anne Thackeray Ritchie, and actress-playwright-

novelist Elizabeth Robins—began to dovetail with my analysis of Besant, and out of these conjoined interests grew my book-length study *Creative Negativity: Four Victorian Exemplars of the Female Quest* (2001). Focussing on Besant's two extensive forays into autobiographical writing, I argued in that book for a theory of deconversion to explain her convoluted life path. I am grateful to Helen Tarter of Stanford University Press for her support and encouragement during the years that marked the book's coming to fruition. Although my framing of *Autobiographical Sketches* in this edition does not replicate material from that book, the insights I gained during the course of completing it determined my expertise on the subject of Besant and her *oeuvre*. In this respect, I was delighted that Abigail Burnham Bloom called upon me to provide the entry on Besant for her edited collection entitled *Nineteenth-Century British Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (2000).

All along, my colleagues across various disciplines at the University of Texas at Austin have engaged me in fruitful dialogue about Besant's myriad roles in the shaping of our current society and cultural values. I am especially grateful to Roger Louis, Director of British Studies, for the many opportunities he provided for me to speak to that forum; out of those discussions emerged my working contacts with members of the Center for Asian Studies, most notably Richard Lariviere, Gail Minault, and Leah Madge Young Renold, who served as sounding-boards for many of my theories and observations about Besant's contributions to India in the first third of the twentieth century. In Art History, I have been particularly thankful for Linda Henderson's shared interest in Besant; speaking to her students and the Modernist Studies Group she chairs has influenced my thinking about Besant's multiple modernisms, in fact leading me to present a paper entitled "Annie Besant Walks the Modernist Walk" for the 2003 "Victorian Legacies" conference sponsored by the Victorian Interdisciplinary Studies Association of the Western United States, which I co-chaired with the ever-helpful Kathryn Ledbetter.

The most productive year that I spent on this project was the result of my being awarded a University of Texas Faculty Research Assignment in 2005. During the course of that year, I spent long periods in the Tallons Law Library, researching and writing a paper entitled "Autodidacticism and Self-Representation: Annie Besant for the Defense" for the Association for the Study of Law, Culture, and the Humanities; I am grateful to Susan Sage Heinzelman, Associate Director of the UT Center for

Women's and Gender Studies and the President of ASLCH, for the opportunities she provided for me to discuss the legal complexities of Besant's two trials with conference participants. Thanks to a UT Research Institute Special Research Grant and the Alice Mackie Scott Tacquard Centennial Lectureship I was able to travel to Britain and participate in the Oxford Round Table on Women's Rights. While in Oxford I worked at the Bodleian Library, and I am especially grateful to the staff of the Indian Institute for their diligence in helping me to find obscure and uncatalogued items among their holdings.

Other British research facilities that proved useful in my preparation of this edition include both the Manuscripts Reading Room and the Oriental and India Office Collections at the British Library, London, and I am grateful for the assistance that I received at the British Library's Colindale Newspaper Branch. While in London, I also drew upon several of the Historic Collections at the University of London Senate House Library, namely, the Rare Books and Special Collections and the Archives and Manuscripts Division. I am especially grateful for the warm reception I received at the headquarters of the National Secular Society in Red Lion Square; Keith Porteous Wood, NSS President, had already answered many of my questions by correspondence, and Jennifer Jeynes, Librarian of the Humanist Reference Library for the South Place Ethical Society at the Conway Hall Humanist Centre, went out of her way to assist me in tracking down issues of *Our Corner* and many of the Freethought pamphlets I had not otherwise been able to obtain. Members of the Shaw Society, and their President Barry Morse in particular, indulged my curiosity about the prickly Shaw-Besant friendship at several of their meetings. Finally, I am very thankful for the assistance rendered by Elizabeth Pinel, Senior Librarian Learning Assistant of the Bishopsgate Library, in making available to me the Bradlaugh Papers that form part of the library's Historical Collections.

The majority of the manuscript materials and rare books by and about Besant remains in the possession of various branches of the Theosophical Society, and I am most fortunate to have been warmly received by all of their representatives. At the Theosophical Library for the Foundation for Theosophical Studies in London, Librarian Barry Thompson provided me with the opportunity to study one-of-a-kind items from his files, while both National President Colin Price and Chief Publicist Colyn Boyce provided me with leads to additional resources I have con-

sulted elsewhere. I am thankful to James A. Santucci, Editor of *Theosophical History: A Quarterly Journal of Research*, for his assistance, as well as that of Michael Gomes, Librarian of the New York Theosophical Society Library. At the Headquarters of the Theosophical Society in America, Wheaton, Illinois, I have through the years come to rely upon the expert knowledge of former President (now International Vice-President) John Algeo and his wife Adele, while Elisabeth Trumpler, Head Librarian of the Henry S. Olcott Memorial Library, has been an indefatigable resource. Thanks to the efforts of Professor Algeo, then-editor of *Quest*, I published my article “Confounding or Amazing? The Multiple Deconversions of Annie Wood Besant” (2004), as a result generating further interest in and information about Besant from the TS membership. Lastly, I am grateful to D.K. Govindaraj, Manager of the Theosophical Publishing House at the International Headquarters in Adyar, India, for permission to quote from passages of Besant’s *An Autobiography*.

The resources at the University of Texas have been generous to me. I am grateful for the persistence of the librarians at the Interlibrary Loan Division of the Perry Casteñeda Library, the expertise of English and Women’s Studies Bibliographer Lindsey Schell, and the forbearance of the staff at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, where I put to good use an HRHRC Fellowship in the summer of 2003 to prepare the notes for this edition. I am indebted to the University and the Department of English for numerous travel subsidies that have supported my research, and I appreciate the camaraderie of the Department’s Nineteenth-Century British Interest Group as well as that of the newly constituted Long Nineteenth-Century British Literature Forum, whose membership extends across Central Texas. Among my colleagues, I especially single out James Garrison, Dolora Chapelle-Wojciehowski, and Lynn Miller for their faith in this project and their on-going dialogue with me about its progress. Many of my students, past and present, have indulged my interest in Besant, listening to my arguments in various venues and challenging me with their astute questions; I would like to particularly acknowledge Lynn Byrd, Mary Lenard, Kristen Hogan (and her BookWoman platforms), Marilyn Lehman, Carol Rhoades, Srilata Mukherjee, and Elizabeth Dell.

From the outset, I have delighted in sharing my fascination with Besant with Joss Marsh, who excels in her knowledge about the Besant-Bradlaugh trial and other Freethought legal battles,

and whose study of late-nineteenth heretical women fuels my own. Linda Peterson has all along been a fellow-student of Victorian women's autobiography; I am grateful to her for her early enthusiasm for this project and her willingness to write on my behalf in my grant-seeking endeavors. Janice Carlisle has been a model Victorian scholar and mainstay resource for me for many years. I am indeed fortunate in having these two fine scholars as my series editors; I could not ask for better guidance and counsel from their oversight. As always, my greatest indebtedness is to my colleague and partner, Kirk Hampton. His willingness to stay the course with me at every stage of this enterprise, ranging from brainstorming to proofreading, has been heroic; to him I express my profound gratitude and return his good will.

Introduction: Annie Besant's First Foray into Self-Writing

Anyone in 1884 who was interested in learning about the life story of Annie Wood Besant (1847-1933) would have needed to look no further than the pages of the journal she was editing in London called *Our Corner*. There, in the January issue of her year-old monthly publication, she announced to her readership, "I have resolved to pen a few brief autobiographical sketches, which may avail to satisfy friendly questioners, and to serve, in some measure, as defence against unfair attack."¹ A year and a half later she brought her serialized self-accounting to a close. Not yet thirty-eight years of age when the book version of *Autobiographical Sketches* was published in 1885 by the Freethought Publishing Company (which she had co-founded in her thirtieth year), she was already the subject of enough notoriety to warrant a saleable biography or autobiography, and by then she could also count on a substantial body of "friendly" adherents as well as vociferous opponents against whom she had been needing to defend herself for quite some time.

Autobiographical Sketches takes up an amazing array of subject matter particular to the social, religious, political, legal, and cultural history of Victorian England. Female education, Evangelicalism, a wife's ability to claim her own earnings, freedom of speech and religion, women's legal self-representation, the right to provide birth control information, a mother's prerogatives regarding her children—these are just a few of the issues Besant addresses and explores as she reviews her life history in this series of sketches. On the immediate horizon lie her concerns for female industrial workers, the women's suffrage movement, Irish home rule, and Socialism—all compelling issues for Besant throughout the 1880s and ones that she prefigures in this, her first autobiographical endeavor. Meanwhile, in terms of human relations, Besant recounts both public and private tales. The infamous events in her life bring to the fore a figure like Freethinker and eventual Member of Parliament Charles Bradlaugh (1833-91), while her more intimate accounting lets us see her idealistic but unfortunate marriage to an uncompromising Church of England clergyman, her death-

1 *Our Corner* 3.1 (1884): 1. Subsequent citations to *Autobiographical Sketches* will be to this Broadview edition and will appear in parentheses in the body of this introduction, as well as in other selections in the appendices.

defying struggles with the health of her young children, and her longstanding devotion to her self-sacrificing mother.

But strangely enough, looking just eight years beyond the 1885 publication of *Autobiographical Sketches*, we find Besant tackling her life story yet again in the 1893 recasting of her experiences as a volume simply entitled *An Autobiography*.² Why did she rewrite her autobiography after such a short passage of time? It was not merely to fill in the gaps between the two publications with additional personalities like dramatist and Fabian-Socialist George Bernard Shaw or labor-leader Herbert Burrows, nor was she chiefly concerned with highlighting her role in the Byrant & May matchgirls' strike or in the electrifying events of Bloody Sunday in Trafalgar Square. Rather, Besant had made a major life-change, one that inspired her to re-examine her entire belief system and to build toward a new endpoint, namely, her conversion to—and new-found peace in—the worldwide humanitarian and mystical religion known as Theosophy.³

So why should anyone read *Autobiographical Sketches* today, given the fact that Besant could be said to have “updated” her life story in *An Autobiography*? Because this series of sketches constitutes her first foray into self-writing, it represents an immediate attempt to select the episodes in her life that she considered most important in shaping her sense of self. There is a freshness to this initial self-confrontation, an honesty that risks being compromised in the later endeavor, which unavoidably seeks to justify or explain a new mindset that seems incomprehensible to an even less tolerant readership. The writing in this first rendering of her autobiography is energetic, unmediated by the author's need to vindicate herself in the face of those friends and the public at large who felt betrayed by her conversion. Thus, *Autobiographical Sketches* provides the primary account of Besant's early struggles

2 *An Autobiography* was first published by T. Fisher Unwin of London in 1893, and subsequent editions by the Theosophical Press appeared in 1894, 1908, and 1939. Appendix B reprints Besant's preface to the first two editions, as well as selected passages in comparison to excerpts from *Autobiographical Sketches*. Citations to *An Autobiography* will be to the 1893 edition and will appear in parentheses in this introduction, keyed to selections in Appendix B when applicable.

3 Theosophy will be briefly defined and discussed throughout this introduction, but for Besant's own words on the subject, see especially “Why I Became a Theosophist” (1889) as republished (in part) in Appendix A; for more detailed introductions to Theosophy, see the studies listed in the bibliography, most notably those by Bruce F. Campbell (1980) and Robert Ellwood (1986).

with belief and her reformist evolution without the added complications that Theosophy, as a marginalized religion, inevitably brings. This is the text which first records the young Annie Besant's self-encounter with her agonizing history; as the original document of her engagement with religious doubt, her courage in taking up unpopular causes like atheism and birth control, and her dismay at discovering a woman's legal limitations in defending herself in a child custody hearing, *Autobiographical Sketches* fully deserves to be available to today's reading public.

Ideally, of course, the two autobiographical texts should be read in conjunction, combined with an overview of the remaining forty years of Besant's life as the head of the Theosophical movement and a leader in promoting self-rule in India. However, because *Autobiographical Sketches* has remained out of print since its initial 1885 publication in book form, while *An Autobiography* has been kept in continual reprint by the Theosophical Publishing Society, most readers and scholars today assume that Besant's second autobiographical undertaking constitutes the only self-authored version of her life story. It is the goal of this edition to remedy that misconception and, along with reproducing key examples of some of Besant's contemporaneous publications—including comparative passages from *An Autobiography*—to widen an awareness of the full range of her contributions as a writer, thinker, and leading proponent of social change.

Life and After Life

Autobiographical Sketches depicts Besant's life from her birth (as Annie Wood) to Anglo-Irish parents in London in 1847 through the 1879 series of trials for custody of her daughter Mabel. Although Besant's father died when she was barely six, she thrived under the loving care of a devoted mother, and she received the kind of individualized education from Ellen Marryat, sister of well-known nautical novelist Frederick Marryat, that served her well as an independent observer and thinker. Miss Marryat's Evangelicalism combined with the young Annie's attraction to the ceremonial forms of Catholicism when they travelled on the Continent, and so it was not surprising that, lacking a clear-cut outlet for her religious zeal and desire to help others, nineteen-year-old Annie Wood elected the next best thing, namely, marrying a clergyman, Frank Besant. *Autobiographical Sketches* goes on to detail her falling away from the Church of England and her husband; after six years of marriage, she filed a deed of separation, taking

three-year-old Mabel with her and leaving their four-year-old son Digby to be raised by his father. On her own in London, Besant rapidly moved up the ranks of the National Secular Society, and in 1877 she joined forces with Charles Bradlaugh to publish and disseminate birth control literature in the form of Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy: The Private Companion of Young Married People*. Charged with obscenity, they eventually won their case on a technicality, but by then her notoriety caused the Reverend Frank Besant to bring charges against her as an immoral and unfit mother. This courtroom drama and its ultimate decision constitute the final section of Besant's first autobiography.

An Autobiography rehearses these same episodes and experiences from Besant's new perspective as a Theosophist (see the comparison of these two autobiographies in the next section of this introduction, as well as Appendix B), and it introduces the events of the 1880s that culminate in her 1889 conversion. Although still emotionally attached to Bradlaugh and allied with the Freethought movement through her sub-editorship of the *National Reformer*, Besant gradually moved away from the tenets of Secularism, becoming a Socialist and member of the Fabian Society in order to more directly effect social change. In the interim, she had also begun to pursue a science degree at the University of London, and in 1888 she was elected to the London School Board. But if Bradlaugh can be considered the chief mentor of *Autobiographical Sketches*, then Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-91) replaces him in that capacity in *An Autobiography*. With Henry Steel Olcott, Blavatsky had founded Theosophy in New York in 1875, and she was residing in London when Besant reviewed her occult compendium entitled *The Secret Doctrine* (1888). After her conversion and then the death of Madame Blavatsky in 1891, Besant took her place as head of the Theosophical Society for Europe and India, and it is from this position and with a sense of reconciliation that she concludes *An Autobiography* in 1893 with the words "PEACE TO ALL BEINGS."

Bridging the apparent divide between Besant's two autobiographical volumes are two shorter self-accountings: "Why I Became a Theosophist," published in 1889 under the imprint of the Freethought Publishing Company, which she had co-founded with Bradlaugh in 1877; and "From 1875 to 1891: A Fragment of Autobiography," which constituted her farewell address to the Secularists in the Hall of Science. (Passages from these two brief pieces of autobiographical writing conclude Appendix A.) For the remaining events of Besant's life after publication of *An Auto-*

biography, we must turn to her biographers, for she never again undertook a major writing of her life story. Those subsequent forty years, primarily spent in India, were solidly packed with her writings and activities on behalf of the Theosophical Society, the Home Rule movement, and educational reform. It is no wonder that she did not find the time to address her life again when she was so busy living it, though anyone interested in piecing together the details of that final storyline can do so by amassing and analyzing her output of several hundred new publications, many of which originated in speeches that she delivered throughout India, back in London, and around the world.

After visiting India in 1893, Besant made her final home there, spending most of her time at the Theosophical compound at Adyar. She was elected President of the worldwide organization of the Theosophical Society in 1907, and two years later, along with Charles Leadbeater, she began overseeing the education and training of a young boy named Jiddu Krishnamurti, who was predicted to be the coming Messiah, or new World Teacher. In addition, she became increasingly active in Indian politics, so much so in fact that the British government considered her a threat and interned her for three months during World War I. Shortly after her release in 1917, Besant was elected the first woman President of the National Congress of India, and although her leadership in the march toward Indian independence eventually diminished, she variously earned the respect of Mohandas Gandhi, Muhammad Jinnah, and Jawaharlal Nehru. But Besant's chief role in India as far as the people were concerned lay in co-founding and directing Benares Hindu College, which in its new status as a university conferred an honorary doctorate on her in 1921, and she is still fondly recalled by women who were educated there. Her life came to a close in 1933, just four years after she experienced the disappointment of Krishnamurti renouncing the international accolades bestowed upon him.

Any overview of the life of Annie Wood Besant results in enumerating her many stages of development, and most biographers find themselves labelling those stages in terms that reveal their respective biases. Perhaps the most frequently cited biography is the two-volume edition published by Arthur H. Nethercot, imperintently titled *The First Five Lives of Annie Besant* (1960) and *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant* (1963), which he further breaks down as follows: 1) the Christian wife, 2) the atheist mother, 3) the martyr of science, 4) the Socialist labor agitator, 5) the *chela* (disciple) of the Mahatmas, 6) the Indian educator/propagandist/mystic, 7) president of the Indian National Congress, 8) the

deserted leader, and 9) life in death.⁴ Apparently it has been next to impossible for some biographers to judge Besant impartially, partly because she allied herself with such controversial causes and partly because her seeming reversals have opened her up to charges of inconsistency and even hypocrisy. But as the scrupulous reader of *Autobiographical Sketches* will undoubtedly note, Besant never changed a belief system or espoused a new cause without ruthlessly examining both her current assumptions and their logical consequences; no doctrine remained sacrosanct, no matter how alienating the outcome of embracing a new set of convictions might prove to be.

As I shall be arguing throughout this introduction, Besant's overall life-curve reflects a coherence and integrity that she herself uncovered in rewriting her life as *An Autobiography* and that readers of *Autobiographical Sketches* can learn to recognize. It would seem, however, that few of her biographers have carefully read either of her autobiographies; failing to acknowledge her line of continuity, they not only have exposed their own prejudices but they have sometimes published fallacious and incomplete biographies as well. Consequently, Besant's reputation and legacy have suffered, and she is known less for the scope and significance of her accomplishments and more for contradictions that a superficial reading of her life history produces.

Writing and Rewriting Herself

"Above all writers, I envy and admire autobiographers," remarked editor James Payn as he penned the opening of his own autobiography in the same year that Annie Besant launched *Autobiographical Sketches*. "Unhappily," he went on to proclaim, "the feat of narrating one's own life in print can only be performed once," though he quickly confessed, "I should like to do it ever so many times, regarding myself in each case from a new standpoint."⁵ Annie Besant may not have had the luxury of time to "recast" and revise her serialized self-accounting before publish-

4 Both Nethercot volumes were published by University of Chicago Press. For other biographies, see the bibliography at the end of this edition; Anne Taylor's (1992) is probably the most detailed of recent studies, but for more balanced accountings, see those by Rosemary Dinnage (1986) and Olivia Bennett (1988).

5 Payn had already serialized *Some Literary Recollections* in *The Cornhill Magazine*; the text for book publication in 1884 was "recast, and now appears, with additions, in a somewhat different, and, it is hoped, an improved form" (Preface; London: Smith, Elder).

ing it in book form, as would Payn, but she did have the opportunity to perform the narration of her life in print on an entirely new occasion some eight years later with the writing and publishing of *An Autobiography*. Comparing and contrasting Besant's two autobiographies not only allows the reader to better understand the shared impetus to each but also opens up for our consideration issues that are central to the act of composing autobiography in general and women's autobiography in particular. The reader of this edition can consult some of the key parallel passages in both texts in Appendix B and formulate his or her theories about them, but for now I offer a few of my own observations and interpretations to demonstrate what a comparison of both texts can generate.

The desire to explain and potentially defend herself constitutes an immediate impetus to the writing of both Besant's autobiographical texts, but ultimately they serve different purposes for her and her contemporary readers. On the one hand, *Autobiographical Sketches* by its very choice of title and periodical mode of publication reflects a piecemeal, vignette approach to telling the story of a life still very much in progress; from the outset, its ongoing, incremental method suggests that the autobiographer will be selecting a series of incidents in her life that she considers critical to understanding her current circumstances and evolving state of mind. *An Autobiography*, on the other hand, signals a more fully shaped perspective; although the indefinite article "an" may seem to imply a provisional quality, as if this were one of many self-accountings, the preface to the text promptly assures the reader that the point of telling the tale of one person's struggle toward the light lies in how it might prove instructive to the many. With the publication of *Autobiographical Sketches*, Besant provides for the first time a behind-the-scenes look at the chief experiences that contributed to the controversial episodes of her life, while the author of *An Autobiography* expects that her readership will be familiar with those early events and now wants to gain insight into her conversion to Theosophy, a conversion that for her represents a final choice, thus making this text her definitive autobiography.

Although the writer of *An Autobiography* does review and rewrite her earlier text, many passages undergo only minor shifts and changes, suggesting that her views on these elements in her life history remain fairly constant. In fact, most of the experiences of Besant's early childhood and education emerge intact in the second version; what does change is a slight shift in perspective. On the subject of her Irish identity, for example, she tends to be

more anecdotal in *Autobiographical Sketches*; after all, she is recalling and recounting these stories in print for the first time. The second time around, however, Besant feels more compelled to connect her Irishness with her acknowledged mystical propensity, pointing out that the “faculty for seeing visions and dreaming dreams” is fairly common among the “Keltic races” (A25) and then following up that observation by noting that the “sensitive-ness to impressions other than physical ones ... was a marked feature in my own childhood, [and] was present also in the family to which I belonged” (A27).

One of the most dramatic and life-changing events that is brought to the fore in both autobiographies occurs when the young wife holds forth to the empty pews in her husband’s church and discovers her gift for oratory. All along, in both texts, the autobiographer acknowledges the incipient orator, not only in Ellen Marryat’s “classroom” but when Besant addresses the Fenian supporters in Manchester, but her “first lecture” in Sibsey Church marks a turning point in her sense of self-confidence. This time the shift in emphasis between *Autobiographical Sketches* and *An Autobiography* is a subtle but telling one. In the earlier text we witness the joy of self-discovery only slightly mediated by an awareness of how well her oratorical skills will serve her future endeavors (137), while in the second text the sense of power as it will be applied to her leadership capacity on a worldwide scale for the Theosophical cause begins to take precedence (A181), with the word and concept of “power” increasingly reiterated as the larger scale is first contemplated and then realized (A115-17).

Still more significant differences occur when an event is radically reinterpreted or when one text includes what the other does not. One set of noteworthy contrasts involves Besant’s reaction to the death-threatening illness of her infant daughter—the reaction that leads to her eventual rejection of Christianity and subsequently to her atheism.⁶ “There had grown up in my mind a feeling of angry resentment against the God who had been for weeks, as I thought, torturing my helpless baby” (110), she declaims in *Autobiographical Sketches*, thereby raising and under-

6 Besant collected fifteen of the pamphlets that she had written for Theist Thomas Scott and published them as *My Path to Atheism* in 1877 (the volume is dedicated to Scott). Her atheism is well-recorded in her many articles and pamphlets written for the National Secular Society and later published by the Freethought Press, but her stance is perhaps best summed up in “Why I Don’t Believe in God” (1887), published here in part in Appendix A.

scoring the age-old theological debate about the dilemma of human suffering. In contrast, *An Autobiography* highlights not so much the suffering of the daughter as that of the mother, focusing instead on the depths of her own despair. That despair grows within her, leaving her “with no door of escape from a life that, losing its hope in God, had not yet learned to live for hope for man” (493)—unless, of course, she considers suicide. In the second text Besant recalls how she struggled with the temptation to commit suicide, an admission she does not make in the first version of her autobiography; not yet writing from a position of spiritual certainty, the author of *Autobiographical Sketches* apparently represses—perhaps from herself but decidedly from her readers—the memory of facing death as the final negation.

But *Autobiographical Sketches* also includes key passages that *An Autobiography* omits or extensively edits. In the first encounter with her life story, Besant provides a more detailed account of her writing for the *National Reformer* and her Freethought activities in general. More specifically, unmentioned in the second autobiography are the exposure of Benjamin Disraeli’s Suez Canal policy (179) and the stipulated objectives of the National Secular Society in the year immediately preceding the Knowlton trial (179–81). Moreover, the Knowlton trial is conjoined in a single chapter with the trial for custody of Besant’s daughter in *An Autobiography*, and she removes any suspense about the long-term outcome of the custody trial by virtue of her revelation that “[t]he moment [my children] were old enough to free themselves, they came back to me” (A225). In contrast, *Autobiographical Sketches* features both trials over the course of four discrete sections, and Besant has clearly staked out the mother’s trial for her daughter’s custody as the culminating point toward which that entire text builds, closing with the avowal, “I had hoped to save her from the pain of rejecting a superstitious faith, but that is now impossible, and she must fight her way out of darkness into light as her mother did before her” (250). These two trials mark Besant’s chief public accomplishment and her chief private defeat at the time that she is writing *Autobiographical Sketches*, and she grants them the pre-eminence they deserve.⁷

7 In each case, I am using the singular term *trial* to indicate the various formal court proceedings required to reach a final verdict, thus inevitably including various petitions, orders, claims, counter-claims, and appeals when the principals needed to physically appear in court. As a result, each of these trials actually took place over a period of about eighteen months.

An Autobiography, in contradistinction, treats these two trials as stages on the road toward finally finding an inner and outward peace within the Theosophical movement. Derived from the Greek, *theosophy* means “wisdom or knowledge concerning things divine,” and as a religion or philosophy of life it seeks to reveal the truth underlying all belief systems. Besant’s first major encounter with Theosophy occurred in 1889, when the editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, William Stead, asked her to review Blavatsky’s *The Secret Doctrine*. Besant was initially as much drawn to Theosophy by Blavatsky’s charisma as by its precepts; it not only satisfied her humanitarian and Socialist aspirations, but it also met her basic need to discover truth and find within it the peace that fulfilled the spiritual quest that had all along fueled the tale she told in *Autobiographical Sketches*. As she explains in her pamphlet “Why I Became a Theosophist,” “No one turns his back on Freethought who subjects every new doctrine to the light of reason, who weighs its claims without prejudice, and accepts or rejects it out of loyalty to truth alone,” concluding, “I ask no other epitaph on my tomb but SHE TRIED TO FOLLOW TRUTH” (see Appendix A, pp. 264 and 266). For her, that truth was already formulated in the official objectives of the Theosophical Society:

to form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or colour; to promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literatures, religions, philosophies and sciences, and to demonstrate its importance; and to investigate unexplained laws of nature, and psychic powers latent in man.⁸

From *An Autobiography*’s perspective of seeing a secure future dedicated to helping all humankind, Besant was in a better position than she had been when she was writing *Autobiographical Sketches* to look back on her personal experience as an unhappy wife and not only admit her mistakes but also critique marriage in no uncertain terms. While the earlier autobiography is circumspect about the dissolution of her marriage (138), the second can openly declare, “In 1873 my marriage tie was broken” (A117);

8 Essentially phrased in the same language as cited by Besant in “Why I Became a Theosophist” (264), these remain the stipulated objectives of the Theosophical Society today in all its official publications. For a comparison with the objectives of the National Secular Society when she joined it in 1874, see *Autobiographical Sketches* note XI.12.

now Besant is willing to acknowledge, “And, truly, women or men who get themselves concerned about the universe at large, would do well not to plunge hastily into marriage” (A98). There was one major casualty of her conversion to Theosophy, however—her leadership role as a Neo-Malthusian who promoted birth control. The outspoken proponent of family planning in *Autobiographical Sketches* gives way in *An Autobiography* to an advocate for self-restraint within marriage, asserting that “however justifiable Neo-Malthusianism might be while man was regarded only as the most perfect outcome of physical evolution, it was wholly incompatible with the view of man as a spiritual being, whose material form and environment were the results of his own mental activity” (A237).⁹

Although such instances of revising and rewriting her life are readily apparent to the reader of *An Autobiography* who is familiar with *Autobiographical Sketches*, Besant’s propensity to review and reconsider her life story anew can already be seen *within* the pages of the first text. Written to monthly deadlines and published serially over a period of eighteen months, *Autobiographical Sketches* shows Besant routinely revisiting the same events after she has first introduced them, necessarily reframing them as she looks back upon what she has said earlier and then denoting their significance to the present-time writer. This self-consciousness takes the form of recurrent themes appearing throughout the body of *Autobiographical Sketches*, themes that will then be retested for their continuing value in the pages of *An Autobiography*. Mothers, mothering, and motherhood, for instance, take on new meanings over time and as Besant sees herself in relation to her own mother, to Bradlaugh, to her daughter, and to the disempowered whose rights she will champion. Self-reflexively noting and commenting on recurrent elements in her life story, Besant thus confirms herself as a changing, evolving, modern woman, while at the same time her single-minded search for truth reveals an essential core personality whose life narrative manifests itself as a spiritual quest.

9 Besant directly addresses the topic of marriage in her American pamphlet, *Marriage: As It Was, as It Is, and as It Should Be* (New York: Asa K. Butts, 1879), published largely due to the attention she received from the Knowlton trial and her own publication, *The Law of Population* (1877; see Appendix D). As for recanting her Neo-Malthusian position, see her *Theosophy and the Law of Population* (London and Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1896), from which an excerpt is also published in Appendix D; although in subsequent years she moderated her views somewhat, she never returned to her original stance.

It may seem strange to call *Autobiographical Sketches* a spiritual quest; after all, Besant is writing it from the viewpoint of a materialist and an atheist. Yet she is a decided seeker after meaning and a warrior for justice, and the two elements combine in the concept of the spiritual quest. Admittedly the language of the quest is more developed in the second autobiography—its very chapter titles invoke “war,” “struggle,” “fighting”—but because her final goal has already been achieved when she composes *An Autobiography*, the later text loses some of the tension and spontaneity of the first battleground. Nonetheless, both autobiographies repeatedly share the image of searching for the light, and in one of those few passages that remain unaltered in the second version, Besant explains how the statue *Ajax Crying for the Light* provided her with an apt pseudonym: “The cry through the darkness for light, even if light brought destruction, was one that awoke the keenest sympathy of response from my heart.” Recalling the language of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s poem about the always-questing Ulysses, both autobiographies continue to speak in unison: “To see, to know, to understand, even though the seeing blind, though the knowledge sadden, though the understanding shatter the dearest hopes—such has ever been the craving of the upward-striving mind in man” (157; A180-81). That Besant re-employs precisely the same language in her second autobiography when it is clearly tied to the concept of the spiritual quest reinforces the interpretation that the first is one as well.

So when all is said and done, the two autobiographies speak to each other in ways that are highly informative. Chiefly, they illustrate more continuity between them than one might expect—the second is simply more self-conscious about its “rewriting” than the first. Despite the fact that *Autobiographical Sketches* is more exploratory and open-ended, and *An Autobiography* has a more authoritative cast, both convey a fusion of the evolving yet constant self. Reading *Autobiographical Sketches* closely in order to recognize the author of *An Autobiography* between the lines—and vice versa—is challenging but rewarding, for it encourages the reader to recognize the pattern of rigorous self-examination at work at every level of Besant’s life. Such self-examination inevitably makes for a complex existence, and it carries with it concomitant disappointments, especially so for a woman very much ahead of her time. Interestingly enough, however, it is not difficult to see how writing her first autobiography helped Besant become more self-aware of the patterns in her life, and subjecting the multiplicity of her roles (and selves) to a primary narrative of her search for truth provides us with a much better under-

standing of what remains enigmatic to readers of her external life as rendered by biographers. Two of Besant's many strengths that continue to amaze her readership today—her exhaustive command of biblical history and her legal expertise—are the subject matter of the next two sections of this introduction.

From Pious to Impious

Himself an editor, William Zinsser has observed that “the memoirist’s task is largely one of construction. Faced with the untidy sprawl of half-remembered events, the writer must become the editor of his own life, imposing on it a narrative shape that it never actually had.”¹⁰ *Autobiographical Sketches*, however, could be said to represent its author’s attempt at a deconstruction of her life. As such, it crosses the boundaries of several literary genres and their subtypes. As an *apostasy*, it tells the tale of a series of renunciations of both religious beliefs and party affiliations. It could be called an *apologia pro vita sua* as well, for it is surely a defense of both her opinions and her way of life. And as I have argued elsewhere, this self-history is also a record of “deconversion,” for in the process of leaving behind one belief system and adopting another, Besant is as much wrenched by her sense of loss as she is celebratory about widening her circle of meaning. Ultimately, though, the concept of the spiritual autobiography best epitomizes her mode of self-discovery because it traces a pattern of spiritual progress that emerges from a succession of struggles between opposing forces. In this respect, it is finally a gendered medium, reflecting a woman’s intertextual propensity to blend the individual with the community, to move back and forth between the personal and the public, to find the pious in the impious (and vice versa), to treat her life story as a spiritual journey that willfully transcends boundaries in its quest for truth.¹¹

10 William Zinsser (ed.), “Introduction,” *Spiritual Quests: The Art and Craft of Religious Writing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 12.

11 See “The Multiple Deconversions of Annie Wood Besant,” in my book *Creative Negativity: Four Victorian Exemplars of the Female Quest* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001), 96-134 (notes 207-14), as well as John D. Barbour, *Versions of Deconversion: Autobiography and the Loss of Faith* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1994). For more on the subject of nineteenth-century women’s spiritual autobiography, see especially Mary Jean Corbett, “Feminine Authorship and Spiritual Authority in Victorian Women’s Autobiographies,” *Women’s Studies* 18.1 (1990): 13-30; and Linda H. Peterson, *Traditions of Victorian Women’s Autobiography: The Poetics and Politics of Life Writing* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999).

By the time she published *Autobiographical Sketches* in 1885, Besant had successfully polarized her contemporaries in Victorian England. She had already embraced and rejected Christianity, further talking herself out of agnosticism into atheism. As a Freethinker, she had become a major spokesperson for the National Secular Society and defended in a court of law the right to disseminate birth control information, while as a wife separated from an Anglican minister she had fought for custody of her children in another notorious trial. In microcosm, this first half of Besant's life embodied many of the legal debates and religious controversies of nineteenth-century Britain. Rigorously pursuing the implications of whatever belief system she adopted and then eventually renounced, she had apparently replaced the spiritual with the secular. Yet at the same time, I would argue, her passionate response to whatever belief system she espoused constituted her own brand of religiosity. Thus, it should not seem surprising that she would go on to take up the cause of Socialism with exemplary ardor, or that within a decade of the custody trial that concludes *Autobiographical Sketches* she should convert to Theosophy. Within this framework, I read *Autobiographical Sketches* as a forum that witnesses personal belief undergoing radical change as its author (and protagonist) encounters a range of issues central to the social and religious history of Victorian England.

Born into a three-quarters Irish heritage, Annie Wood thereby inherited a history of Protestantism and Catholicism, both of which were variously repudiated and accepted by her parents. Yet her chief exposure to Christianity in her formative years was to the Evangelicalism of her private instructor, Ellen Marryat, under whose careful tutelage the young Annie questioned her personal relationship to her mother's Anglicanism, all the while allowing herself to be seduced by the atmosphere evoked by pseudo-religious experiences from her reading of Milton and her participation in a ritualized prayer circle. Exposed to the heady imagery of Catholicism in Paris, Annie encountered a visiting bishop, who, acting in concord with an English chaplain, brought the young protégée to a feverish pitch: "I could scarcely control myself as I knelt at the altar rails, and felt as though the gentle touch of the aged Bishop, which fluttered for an instant on my bowed head, were the very touch of the wing of that 'Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove,' whose presence had been so earnestly invoked" (79-80). Thus did the teenage Annie essentially conduct her exclusive Oxford Move-

ment, uncovering her own equation between the Anglican and Catholic creeds.¹²

Although concerned that her daughter might be “too religious” (A24), Mrs. Wood had herself countered her husband’s skepticism by “[clinging] poetically to the artistic side of religion, to its art and to its music, to the grandeur of its glorious fanes [poets], and the solemnity of its stately ritual” (64). She further complicated the issue for her daughter by “[holding] to the notion that women should be ‘religious,’ while men might philosophise as they would” (63). Perhaps the strange logic of this gendered version of belief fed the courage that led Besant to query Anglican divine Dr. Edward Pusey in person about her later doubts. The interview was not a happy one. She was informed in no uncertain terms, “It is not your duty to ascertain the truth.... It is your duty to accept and to believe the truth as laid down by the Church; at your peril you reject it.” “Lost or not,” she replied, “I must and will try to find out what is true, and I will not believe till I am sure” (66). The pattern of relentlessly submitting religious questions to the test of truth was thus firmly established, and for the rest of her life she fought for the individual’s right to find his or her own truth.

Before arriving at this heretical state of affairs, the still youthful Annie had submitted herself to a series of severe tests. The first of these occurred during the Easter season of her eighteenth year. Resolving to sort out the events of “Holy Week,” she listed them as they are variously related by the four Apostles. “Judge, then, of my terror at my own results,” she directs her reader, “when I found myself betrayed into writing down some contradictions from the Bible” (89). Finding “a discord instead of a harmony” was as yet too much for her to contend with, however: “I quickly recognised [doubt] as a temptation of the devil, and I shrank back horror-stricken and penitent for the momentary lapse of faith.” Yet the seeds of doubt had been planted, and “though swiftly trampled down, it had none the less raised its head” (92). As a fervent Christian, Besant was already familiar with the Bible, but testing her doubts led her to become a serious

12 The Oxford Movement originated at Oriel College, Oxford, as an attempt to renew the Church of England, or Anglicanism, by reviving certain Catholic doctrines. Also known as Tractarianism from the series of publications called *Tracts for the Times* (1833–41), it counted among its leadership Edward Pusey, John Keble, and John Henry Newman (the latter eventually converted to Catholicism). For further contextualization, see notes II.5 and III.18 to this edition of *Autobiographical Sketches*.

religious scholar. Any reader of *Autobiographical Sketches* quickly becomes aware of her penetrating knowledge of the history of early Christianity, and the notes to this edition testify to that erudition. Such knowledge serves her well throughout her life as a source of example and allusion, even assisting her as a Theosophist to write a book entitled *Esoteric Christianity* (1901).

Given her mindset at the time, Besant's choice of a marriage partner did not seem so absurd then as it does now at its retelling. Characterizing her emotional and religious feelings as one, she reports that:

the idealised figure of Jesus becomes the object of passion, and the life of the nun becomes the ideal life, as being dedicated to that one devotion Swayed by these feelings, the position of a clergyman's wife seems second only to that of the nun, and has therefore a wonderful attractiveness, an attractiveness in which the particular clergyman affected plays a very subordinate part; it is the "sacred office," the nearness to "holy things," the consecration involved, which seem to make the wife a nearer worshipper than those who do not partake in the immediate "services of the altar." (94-95)

Willing to subordinate herself to a higher calling, she nonetheless did not see that the "subordinate part" that she thought the Reverend Frank Besant would play could still subject her to an unbearable subservience as a Victorian wife and mother.

Throughout the text of *Autobiographical Sketches*, Besant tries to balance the language of self-sacrifice with that of the quest. The will to believe and the need to serve go hand in hand for her, and when her belief system begins to shatter under close examination, she looks for outlets for her spiritual energy. Motherhood and nursing the sick in her husband's parish provide immediate channels for that energy, yet even as she professes a propensity to self-immolation, she confesses to the attraction of a more self-assertive martyrdom. Besant's very style betrays her as a spiritual warrior despite—or perhaps because of—the domestic circumstances that she has chosen.

In fact, as the comparison between *Autobiographical Sketches* and *An Autobiography* has already underlined, it was in her role as mother that Besant experienced the most exacting test of her belief as a Christian and a Theist—and found it utterly unacceptable. Watching her infant daughter suffer and nearly die from bronchitis was more than she could bear. Although Mabel even-

tually recovered, “an important change of mind dated from those silent weeks with a dying child on my knees”:

All my personal belief in God, all my intense faith in his constant direction of affairs, all my habit of continual prayer and of realisation of his presence were against me now. To me he was not an abstract idea, but a living reality, and all my mother-heart rose up in rebellion against this person in whom I believed, and whose individual finger I saw in my baby's agony. (110)

Now the rhetoric of *Autobiographical Sketches* becomes increasingly aggressive, as Besant overtly challenges a God in whom she nonetheless still believes.

As political philosophy replaced orthodox religion as her guiding spirit, she joined forces with like-minded individuals who espoused the Freethought movement. Paired with such rationalism, however, was a more metaphorical sense of her calling. As her 1883 study of the French Revolution, for example, became “a drama in which I had myself taken part, and the actors therein became personal friends and foes” (117), we can witness Besant almost transforming life into a religious allegory in which she acts out her self-defined role. Repeatedly, as she moves from one meaning system to another, she becomes its chief proponent, its public representative. Moreover, she becomes just as charismatic as its male leaders. *Autobiographical Sketches* demonstrates how self-inquiry propels Besant into national regard with respect to Secularism, while it hints at her incipient impact regarding Socialism and Irish Home Rule.¹³

Besant concludes her *Autobiographical Sketches* with the upbeat cry of the spiritual warrior: “I live in the hope that in [my daughter's] womanhood she may return to the home she was torn from in her childhood, and that, in faithful work and noble endeavor, she may wear in future years in the Freethought ranks a name not wholly unloved or unhonored therein, for the sake of the woman who has borne it in the van[guard] through eleven years of strife” (250). One of Besant's goals in writing her autobiography had been to persuade her readership that she was a

13 For Besant's concern about Irish land reform, see her numerous articles in *Our Corner* as well as her 1877 article for the *National Reformer* reprinted here in Appendix D. She also published her spirited debate with Bradlaugh about Socialism in *Our Corner* (1887), which appears in Appendix C.

moral being despite her public image. In large part, she was already preaching to the converted, for her chief readership was among other Freethinkers and subscribers to her own journal. But to judge from at least one review in the mainstream press, it would seem that she was also successful with a wider audience. *The Westminster Review* reports that this is “[a] touching account of the life of a singularly ill-used woman,” that the law “inflicted a cruel wrong upon a tender mother and a spotless wife in depriving her of her children, not on account of any moral fault (for her opponents had sought in vain for a speck upon her purity), but wholly and solely in regard to her speculative opinions” (see Appendix A, 252).

At the same time, however, to call the subject matter of Besant’s intense self-scrutiny mere speculation or opinion is to do her a decided disservice. As the believer turned iconoclast, she remained very much a spiritual seeker; even her avowed enemies would yoke together the apparent paradoxes of her ideological stance by essentially labelling her a blasphemous believer.¹⁴ Under the auspices of the National Secular Society, after all, it was she who finally published a secular song and hymn book, and she was also instrumental in creating a secular funeral service (see Appendix D). The profane measures itself in relation to the sacred, and in Victorian England it was the unorthodox who defined themselves against Christian orthodoxy. Even as each religious crisis in Besant’s life seemed to push her further on the road toward impiety, the rebellious spirit within her fueled a concomitant restlessness that would not be satisfied by temporary respite. Although *Autobiographical Sketches* does not record the final peace she found within Theosophy, it does establish the pattern of her spiritual journey. As a woman living toward the end of the nineteenth-century in Britain, she ran afoul of patriarchal strictures within organized religion and the legal system, yet in Secularism she found the freedom to discover her leadership abilities and to exercise her commitment to serving society at large. If Secularism could not ultimately contain her, it was simply because Annie Besant was still seeking answers it could not deliver.

14 Specifically employing the term *iconoclast*, which had been Bradlaugh’s *nom de guerre* in his early years with the *National Reformer*, Unwin’s 1893 advertisement for *An Autobiography* is indeed friendly: “Sincerest among iconoclasts is Mrs. Besant. Atheism and Theosophy are poles asunder, but she fearlessly made the journey in pursuit of Truth.”

The Law and the Lady

In yet another arena Annie Besant pushed its—and her own—limits. The legal system in Victorian Britain was entirely a male domain. Not only did women not practice law but they had few legal rights, particularly if they were married. But here again Besant found her *métier*, one that she embraced with religious zeal to advance both public and private causes. The public campaign centered on freedom of the press, specifically in this case the right to publish Dr. Charles Knowlton's *Fruits of Philosophy*. First appearing anonymously in 1832, this early American medical handbook on contraception became a popular guide in Britain, going through nine editions before its most recent British publisher was charged with violating the Obscene Publications Act in 1877. Founding a publishing company for the express purpose of printing their own edition that year, Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant issued a clear challenge to governmental censorship. Their arrest, trial, conviction, and subsequent acquittal created a sensation in the press and generated much-needed publicity for the Neo-Malthusian argument they wished to bring to light. Over a period of five days, Besant and her co-defendant argued their own case in court, eloquently defending their actions against the prosecutor's unequivocal pronouncement, "I say that this is a dirty, filthy book, and the test of it is that no human being would allow that book on his table, no decently educated English husband would allow even his wife to have it."¹⁵

Needless to say, this kind of publicity was more than the Reverend Frank Besant could abide, and within a year he sued his wife for custody of their daughter on the grounds that Annie Besant was an unfit mother because she was an atheist and "associated herself with an infidel lecturer and author, named Charles Bradlaugh, in giving lectures and in publishing books and pamphlets, whereby the truth of the Christian religion is impeached, and disbelief in all religion is inculcated" (238). Despite another eloquent self-defense, Annie Besant did not meet the same success in her private legal crusade as she had in her landmark

15 After the Knowlton trial was over, the two co-defendants published their unofficial record of its proceedings as *The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1877). Both Roger Manvell (1976) and Sripati Chandrasekhar (1981) have written book-length studies of the trial, the latter mocking Sir Hardinge Gifford's ascription "a dirty, filthy book" as part of his title. See also J.A. and Olive Banks, "The Bradlaugh-Besant Trial and the English Newspapers," *Population Studies* 8 (1954): 22-34.

public one. No strategy, no brilliant tactics, could win over a judge whose response to her request that she speak on her own behalf was a loud exclamation, "Appear in person? A lady appear in person? Never heard of such a thing!" (239). Yet even this immediate setback could not destroy the faith that Besant had in herself or her daughter: "I know that I shall win my daughter back in her womanhood, though I have been robbed of her childhood. By effacing myself then, I saved her from a constant and painful struggle unfitted for childhood's passionate feelings, and left her only a memory that she loves, undefaced by painful remembrances of her mother insulted in her presence" (249).

Besant's ability to argue these two cases in courts of law could not advance through formal means, but we can glean a measure of her preparation by briefly reviewing what *Autobiographical Sketches* tells us about her private education, her extensive reading in literature and religion, her self-instruction in oratory, and her pre-trial speeches and publications. Had she wished to pursue formal legal training in Victorian Britain, it would of course not have been available to her. Completely a male bastion based on a kind of apprenticeship, the law traditionally housed would-be legal solicitors and barristers in the Inns of Court, letting them act as clerks for several years before admitting them to the Bar. As a more regulated university preparation for the legal profession for men began to develop in the later years of the nineteenth century, women's access to higher education started to make some inroads, but the first women to apply to take the professional examinations in the 1880s would be denied on the grounds that they were not legally defined as "persons." They would remain formally excluded from the legal profession until passage of the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act in 1919, a year after women over thirty gained the right to vote.¹⁶

16 Women were not admitted to the Bar in England until 1921, while the right to vote for women twenty-one and older was not obtained until 1928. For more about the history of women and the practice of law in Britain, see Christine Corcos, "Portia Goes to Parliament: Women and Their Admission to Membership in the English Legal Profession," *Denver University Law Review* 75 (1998): 307-417. For Besant's own arguments in support of women's suffrage, see "The Political Status of Women" (1874) in Appendix D, as well as the text of her 1911 speech "A Question of Humanity," published in *Votes for Women*, the official journal of the WSPU (Women's Social and Political Union). Christabel Pankhurst's 1908 report, "The Commons Debate on Women's Suffrage, With a Reply," is also a useful resource on the subject; see *Suffrage and the Pankhursts*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 18-33.

So Annie Besant simply operated outside the system. Thanks to Ellen Marryat's conscientious training, the young girl learned to reach her own conclusions from the evidence of direct observation as well as to take pleasure in reading inspirational literature. Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* were among her favorite books, and she later recalled how she liked "to personify Satan, and to declaim the grand speeches of the hero-rebel." Besides reading and committing to memory passages from the Bible, Besant also relished reciting any "stately and sonorous verse" (69). And, as she later reported in *An Autobiography*, when she encountered tales of the early Christian martyrs, she would daydream about appearing before Roman judges or Dominican Inquisitors, even holding forth to "a vast crowd of people" (442). Travel abroad would inspire her to learn more about Catholicism on her own and to read extensively in the writings of the early Church Fathers.

While becoming a mother, experiencing her first real doubts about Christianity, and realizing her mistake in marrying someone so unsuited to her temperamentally and intellectually, Besant simultaneously began to explore other avenues of self-expression. She wrote fiction (see, for example, her short story "Sunshine and Shade," published under her maiden-name initials "A.W."), for which payment her husband pocketed her earnings, as was his right before passage of the Married Women's Property Act in 1870 (see Appendix C). Next she started to write anonymous pamphlets that allowed her to sort out what she did and did not believe. Ironically enough, Besant's epiphany about her ability to move others with her own oratory occurred in her husband's church. One day, locking herself in the empty chapel, she delivered her first speech: "I shall never forget the feeling of power and of delight which came upon me as my voice rolled down the aisles, and the passion in me broke into balanced sentences, and never paused for [its] rhythmical expression.... And as though in a dream the solitude became peopled ... and as the sentences came unbidden from my lips ... I knew of a verity that the gift of speech was mine." Anticipating her future on the Freethought lecture circuit, in the courtroom, and eventually leading the Theosophical movement, she concluded, "[I]f ever the chance came to me of public work ... at least this power of melodious utterance should win hearing for any message I had to bring" (136-37).

During the first four years of her formal separation from her husband and before the first of her major trials, Besant honed her

skills as a thinker, writer, and public speaker. Her first prepared speech was entitled “The Political Status of Women” (see Appendix D), and although the suffrage campaign was reluctant to publicly welcome her to its cause as she increasingly became more controversial, she nonetheless contributed to the rhetoric that would in time give women the vote.¹⁷ Quickly becoming an active member of the National Secular Society, Besant soon “threw off” the pseudonym of “Ajax” with which she had been signing her *National Reformer* articles, and before long she was delivering as many speeches in London and the provinces as was the society’s president, Bradlaugh. Now it was possible for her many arguments—critiquing such subjects as marriage, Christianity, the white slave trade, and access to birth control information—to reach a still wider audience through periodical publications, and dozens of pamphlets bearing her name came out under the imprint of the Freethought press.

Thus it was that in 1877, at the age of thirty, Annie Besant had prepared herself to appear in a British courtroom in her own defense. Seeking to test Lord Campbell’s Obscene Publications Act of 1857, Besant and Bradlaugh decided to publish and distribute a new edition of the now-controversial Knowlton booklet, freshly titling it “An Essay on the Population Question.” Their publishers’ preface states their position succinctly: “We republish this pamphlet, honestly believing that on all questions affecting the happiness of the people, whether they be theological, political, or social, fullest right of free discussion ought to be maintained at all hazards” (193). Besant and Bradlaugh thereby put themselves on the line in order to make available information that advocated family planning and provided medical and scientific information about contraception. For this “crime,” they were arrested, briefly jailed, and tried over a five-day period before a special jury of the Queen’s Bench Court in Westminster. Some six months later, they once more spoke in their own defence before the Court of Appeal, winning then on a technicality.

Despite the fact that Besant’s role in the courtroom through-

17 On one of her return trips to London after she had been living in India for almost a decade, Besant spoke at the 15 June 1912 “Votes for Women” program at Albert Hall along with fellow suffragist and Ibsen actress Elizabeth Robins (1862-1952). Robins recalls her on that occasion with awe: “[W]hat an ease of command! *What a voice!*” These remarks form part of Robins’s extensive but still unfinished biography of Besant, housed in the Robins Collection at the Fales Library Special Collections, New York University (7A.63.1).

out the Knowlton trial was demanding, it is not difficult to see how she was both prepared for and supported in this endeavor. After all, she was accustomed to arguing unpopular causes from the Freethought platform as well as being familiar with the adversarial rhetoric of debate from her regular participation in the Dialectical Society. Moreover, earlier trials focusing on other aspects of the Knowlton publication and her general philosophic defense of free speech in print—in the pages of the *National Reformer* as well as in her publishers' preface—had primed her for deliberating the subtleties of the issues at hand. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Besant had a staunch cohort and ally in Bradlaugh; they were used to working long, productive hours together in defence of truth and freedom, and their teamwork contributed significantly toward their ultimate success in court. Another autodidact, Bradlaugh, too, relied on self-education for his legal training.¹⁸

Within a month of the final decree in the Knowlton case, Besant was served notice of her husband's petition charging that she was an unsuitable parent because she had thus far denied seven-year-old Mabel access to religious instruction and because she had "associated herself" with the infamous Bradlaugh (238). Technically still a married woman (*femme couverte*), Annie had no legal identity separate from that of her husband, so the trial went forward as *Besant v. Wood*, naming her brother Henry as defendant since he had served as trustee for her original Deed of Separation.¹⁹ Henry's aid had always been somewhat reluctant and

18 Bradlaugh's role in Besant's life and his own biography are addressed throughout *Autobiographical Sketches* and in the notes to this edition, and two chapters are devoted to him in *An Autobiography*. Twice he attempted abbreviated autobiographical accountings—"A Brief Page of My Life" (1873), written largely about his working-class background as an article for the *National Reformer*, and *The True Story of My Parliamentary Struggle* (1882), documenting his efforts (still in-progress) to take his seat in Parliament with a non-religious oath of office. He and Besant were already beginning to seriously disagree over her involvement with Socialism by the time *Autobiographical Sketches* was published, and their relationship was irrevocably strained by her conversion to Theosophy just two years prior to his death in 1891. The Bradlaugh Papers, which were donated to the National Secular Society by his daughter Hypatia Bonner, now reside at the Bishopsgate Institute in London.

19 The doctrine of *couverture* otherwise determined that a *femme couverte*, as a legally married woman (in contrast to a *femme sole*, or unmarried woman), was considered to be under the cover, (i.e., influence, power, and protection) of her husband. Beyond Besant's two autobiographical

tinged with moral judgment, however, and he soon expressed misgivings about committing the time and effort necessary for the potentially long Chancery proceeding, and so Bradlaugh stood up as her “next friend,” namely, the male willing to appear on her behalf. The judge in question was Sir George Jessel, Master of the Rolls and a Fellow of University College, and this would be the first case to test the Custody of Infants Act passed in 1873. From the outset, Jessel was a hostile judge. Ostensibly a custody trial, it really called the mother to account for her atheism and Neo-Malthusianism in order to determine the guardianship of her child.

As Besant reported in *Autobiographical Sketches*, “My argument fell on deaf ears” (241). Her publications were paraded before the High Court of Chancery—*The Gospel of Atheism*, *The Freethinkers’ Text Book*, *The Law of Population*—and held against her. Finding the mother’s influence “not only reprehensible but detestable, and likely to work utter ruin to the child” (242), Jessel ruled against her. Subsequently, Frank Besant denied Annie access to both children, and so she threatened to sue for “restitution of conjugal rights” in order to see them. In turn, Frank applied to Jessel to restrain her from bringing any suit against him, and Annie appeared before the Court of Appeal in early 1879 to contest that order. This time Jessel advised her to file a counter-claim for divorce or judicial separation.

Now the convoluted intricacies of divorce law held against her. Besant’s claim alleged both physical and verbal abuse from her husband, and she included among her witnesses a doctor who had been in attendance on her during her married life. But because the 1873 Deed of Separation had in effect condoned whatever preceded it, a divorce *à mensâ et thoro* (from room and board), or a full legal separation, would forever be denied her, while a full legal divorce *à vinculo matrimonii* (from the bonds of matrimony), which provided the right to remarry, would have been available to her only if she could prove adultery against her husband.²⁰ Forced to face this final word, Besant ruefully

accounts of her custody trial, the reader can also consult the Public Records Office for the pertinent 1878-79 Chancery files (4, 495ff., 2265, 2642, and 5999), or the edited *Law Reports for the Chancery Division* (1879), as well as special issues of the *Times* and the *National Reformer* (notably April-June 1878 and March-April 1879).

- 20 See note XVII.15 of this edition for definitions of the two kinds of divorce available at this time. According to the Divorce Act of 1857, a man could obtain a full divorce solely by establishing adultery, whereas

observed, “[I]n my desire to avoid publicity, and content in what I believed to be secure possession of my child, I had agreed to a deed which fully protected Mr. Besant against any action on my part, but which could be set aside by him for the purpose of robbing me of my child” (248). Although she finally obtained an order of access to her children, Besant gave up this right for their emotional well-being, secure in the knowledge that they would return to her in adulthood—as indeed they did.

After her legal experiences over a three-year period with the Knowlton and custody trials, Besant began to take steps to acquire a law degree, and this new battleground provided her with yet more self-education in developing and exercising self-defense strategies. Although 1875 had witnessed passage of a law allowing universities to grant degrees to women, London University was the only one to agree to do so by 1878. The first set of roadblocks Besant needed to negotiate required her to pass examinations in five subjects before she could even proceed to a degree course. After matriculating in 1879, she went on to win a First Class in both botany and animal physiology, and these successes prompted her to redirect her efforts to pursue a science degree. That Besant ultimately encountered absolute resistance to the completion of her university degree is testimony to the continued prejudice against secularism at a university that supposedly espoused freedom of religion.

Nonetheless, served by a combination of her eidetic memory and her skills in oratory, Annie Besant had made two rather phenomenal appearances on the judicial stage, holding her own against trained legal minds and making their platform very much her own.

a woman was also required to verify other grounds, such as extreme cruelty, thereby reconfirming the law’s double standard. Of course, as a *femme couverte* a woman was still legally a non-person, and she could not initiate a divorce action on her own until the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 (see Appendix C). Women would not be granted a divorce for the same reason as men until the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923. See also Mary Lyndon Shanley, “‘One Must Ride Behind’: Married Women’s Rights and the Divorce Act of 1857,” *Victorian Studies* 25 (1982): 354–76, as well as A. James Hammerton, *Cruelty and Companionship: Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Married Life* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Victorian or Modern?

Although no one would deny that Annie Besant was a product of the Victorian age, it is clearly true that she was ahead of her time in significant ways that we would have to call modern. Moreover, as I will be arguing later in this section, she heralded many of the key elements of the outlook epitomized by the term *Modernism* that are very much with us today. Born at mid-century in 1847, Besant was subject to the unspoken rules and legal restrictions governing Victorian women, concomitantly enjoying for many years a woman's privilege of steeping herself in a religious education. But her first real rebellion against Victorian proscriptions was symptomatic of her overall rejection of patriarchal authority, as she conjoined both orthodox Christianity and the male prerogative in marriage as her chief adversaries. Yet Victorian proprieties never lost their sway. Despite rumors to the contrary, there is no evidence that Besant ever engaged in extra-marital relations with any of her male comrades in common cause, and although Frank Besant's death in 1917 left her free to marry, her legal status at her death in 1933 was properly titled "widow."

Apart from living well into the twentieth century, however, Besant can be adjudged modern well before century's turn—in fact, we can do so just by taking her measure through the years encompassed by *Autobiographical Sketches* and *An Autobiography*. One way to acknowledge that modernity is to simply note what the twentieth century might *not* have inherited so readily had she not carried out her social, religious, and legal goals. In educational terms, her example helped to advance British women's access to higher education, while her work on the London School Board helped to establish free public education for children of both sexes, including free lunches for those who needed them. With respect to women's suffrage, "The Political Status of Women" (1874), Besant's first lecture and subsequent publication, was among the earliest and most articulate arguments for women's right to vote in Britain, and her voice contributed to the general campaign for equal rights for women that is still underway today. And as for a married woman's legal prerogatives regarding custody of her children upon the breakdown of her marriage, the patently unfair verdict handed down by the Court of Chancery became a rallying cry for reform of parental-rights law as well as for supporting the cause of freedom of religion.

Perhaps most explicitly, though, Besant's role in publicizing and providing birth control information led to its widespread

acceptance and practice, paving the way for other social and legal reforms that she actively promoted as a Socialist intent on bettering the lives of the working classes. Whether putting herself on the line for the right of peaceable assembly or leading a labor strike, Besant helped advance the kind of social justice that Britain tries to set as its standard today. As a woman in the public eye—and often at the center of the storm—she was a strong, articulate leader who did not allow her gender to limit her scope or staying power. Shaw and Stead were just two among the many who extolled Besant's oratorical command, variously calling her the most eloquent and persuasive speaker of her generation. Writing in 1891, Stead put Besant into a pantheon of three "remarkable" women. Including her along with Mary Booth and Josephine Butler, he characterized them as constituting a "trio of propagandists militant, whose zeal, energy, and enthusiasm have left a deep impress upon our time," finally predicting that it was Besant who was likely to make the greatest mark—especially, he thought, if she and Millicent Garrett Fawcett might one day join forces in the House of Commons.²¹ Although that prediction would not come to pass, Besant would go on to take her place in a worldwide public forum.

Most succinctly, the term *Modernist* was implemented in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries to refer to modern ideas or methods, *modern* here referencing its critical application to an artistic movement, primarily the ongoing process of formal innovation in art—in literature often invoking the theme of lost faith. Certainly in this respect we can regard Besant's life trajectory as prefiguring and embodying many of the ideas and forms of Modernism. By writing and rewriting her life story within a period of eight short years, Besant acknowledges both her conti-

21 Mary Macaulay Booth (1847-1939) actively supported the work of her husband, Charles Booth (1840-1916), whose survey of London life and labor at the turn of the century was of momentous importance to the reform community. Josephine Butler (1828-1906), author of *The Education and Employment of Women* (1868) and *Women's Work and Women's Culture* (1869), advanced the cause of women's higher education and helped reform the sex trade; she was instrumental in stopping extension of the Contagious Disease Acts and in repealing existing legislation. For Fawcett, see note XV.3 of this edition. With their right to vote in 1918 ascertained, women could finally be elected to Parliament; the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons was the American-born Nancy Astor (1879-1964). Stead's remarks were published in the introduction to his "character sketch" entitled "Mrs. Annie Besant," published in his *Review of Reviews* 4.22 (October 1891): 349-67.

nuity and her sense of evolving selves. All along, in both her autobiographies, she depicts a dispersed history, drawing as she does from a range of viewpoints and documents typical of a female autobiographer reflecting her multiple roles and the many—sometimes conflicting—expectations that she tries to meet. Numerous biographers have assumed that the grand scheme of her life must betray a tremendous ego, but like most of the women before and after her who attempt to write their own life stories, Besant reveals the female autobiographer's tendency not to operate from the ego-centered agenda of her male counterpart.²² Thus, her first “fragmented” view of herself in *Autobiographical Sketches* could already be said to provide its own Modernist interpretation, while Besant would compound that sense of uncertainty and self-division by rewriting her life in *An Autobiography*, her reinventing of herself at almost every level recalling Modernism's mandate for formal innovation.

The second time around Besant invokes in *An Autobiography* the proto-Modernist jitteriness of her own age, setting the stage in her preface with a single periodic sentence that utilizes the seedbed language of a Modernist manifesto (see Appendix B, 271-72):

Since all of us, men and women of this restless and eager generation—surrounded by forces we dimly see but cannot as yet understand, discontented with old ideas and half afraid of new, greedy for the material results of the knowledge brought us by Science but looking askance at her agnosticism as regards the soul, fearful of superstition but still more fearful of atheism, turning from the husks of outgrown creeds but filled with desperate hunger for spiritual ideals—since all of us have the same anxieties, the same griefs, the same yearning hopes, the same passionate desire for knowledge, it may well be that the story of one may help all, and that the tale of one soul that went out alone into the darkness and on the other side found light, that struggled through the Storm and on the other side

22 To read more about the theory and practice of women's autobiographical writing, see, for example, the following two seminal collections of essays on the subject: Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (eds.), *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), and Sheri Benstock (ed.), *Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writing* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1988).

found Peace, may bring some ray of light and of peace into the darkness and the storm of other lives.

Paradoxically, this instance of Besant's self-writing demonstrates the self-confirming power of fashioning a full-length life-as-model, while at the same time providing an opportunity to deconstruct her own previous autobiography—itself a deconstruction of her life thus far lived, for in *Autobiographical Sketches* Besant was already employing the restless, critical rhetoric that would energize her future changes and evolution.

Another aspect of turn-of-the-century Modernism is its effort to make modern ideas harmonize with religious beliefs. Besant's first real deconversion in the aftermath of the crisis of her young daughter's brush with death was all the more painful because it was accompanied by a profound feeling of loss of emotional harmony, a sense of oneness inspired by her classical and biblical reading. Both autobiographical accountings disclose her militant, analytic *modus operandi*, building to the resolution that, "whatever might be the result, I would take each dogma of the Christian religion, and carefully and thoroughly examine it, so that I should never again say 'I believe' where I had not proved" (116). Yet throughout both autobiographies, Besant continues her search to restore that lost harmony. Once again, it is easy to see that driving force at work in her conversion to Theosophy, but it is notably evident in the language of the ending to *Autobiographical Sketches* as well.

As both a modern and a Modernist, Besant was an innovator in practical and theoretical ways. Along with Bradlaugh's two daughters, she was one of the first women to pursue scientific degrees at the University of London. Tutored by Edward Aveling, a Fellow of University College London, Besant shared his enthusiasm for Darwinism, and she joined him in speculating about Auguste Comte's theory that all branches of science might prove to be interconnected. Not only did Besant help Aveling with his experiments, but she also taught elementary physiology at the Hall of Science. In 1883, the year before she began to write and publish *Autobiographical Sketches*, however, she was denied admission to a class in botany on both religious and social grounds stemming from her reputation as an immodest woman because of her atheism and participation in the Knowlton trial. She was even turned away from the Royal Botanical Gardens—for fear she might corrupt the curator's daughters by her very presence. Ever resilient, Besant nonetheless persisted for three more years, until her chemistry examiner

failed her three times, invoking what he deemed his right to a subjective judgment.²³

Intriguingly, Besant's interests in science and pseudo-science have ramifications for modern art. Working with artist John Varley and building on her solo insights in *Thought Power* (1903), she and Charles Leadbeater expanded the original 1901 edition of their co-authored *Thought-Forms* in 1905; with its colored illustrations and detailed interpretations of auras and emotions, this text has been touted as giving modern painting a new direction.²⁴ In fact, art critic T.H. Robsjohn-Gibbings has postulated that distortion in modern art is almost entirely traceable to occultism and its move toward clairvoyant expression. Besant's most specific Modernist connection, however, centers on the art and writings of the Russian abstract painter, Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). Kandinsky, more than any other artist, recognized how *Thought-Forms* opened up possibilities for expressing emotion in abstract compositions through strategic use of color and shape, and he explicitly cites Besant's influence on his life and method in his own manifesto *On the Spiritual in Art* (1911; 1914).

What form would "formal experimentation" take in someone's life? Annie Besant's life journey seems to typify how this process might work. In general, she shares the Modernist appetite for ever-more-encompassing arenas of thought and expression and for crossing boundaries that are rigid demarcations for her contemporaries—both her former and her future associates. The issues and concepts that Besant raises transcend attempts at boundary-making, especially when we realize that her life and work are best understood as an ongoing quest for truth. To acknowledge some of the multiple Modernisms that informed

23 For a useful overview of the history of women and higher education, see Joyce Senders Pedersen, *The Reform of Girls' Secondary and Higher Education in Victorian England: A Study of Elites and Educational Change* (New York and London: Garland, 1987). Besant's own publications about women and education particularly focused on the need for educational reform in India; see, especially, *The Education of Indian Girls* (Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1904).

24 In this respect, it is also worth noting that her *Occult Chemistry* (1909), another text co-authored with Leadbeater, was praised by Ubaldo Antony, Professor of Chemistry at the Polytechnic of Milan, for providing "for the first time a graphic picture of the atom which was credible and scientific" (quoted in Nethercot, *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963], 113).

her life and work helps us to gauge how much Annie Besant imparted to the Modernist sensibility that is our inheritance.

Had Besant been a man and considered a philosopher or sage, it is likely her apparent contradictions would not have been seized upon and used against her. But as a woman and a “popularizer,” and of a “fringe religion” at that, her sincerity has been called into question, and her motives have been considered suspect, even to the point of deeming her deceptive or at the very least self-deceptive, never mind that what she finally sought to demonstrate was the fundamental truth that underlies all religions. Fortunately, historians of religion like Mark Bevir send us back to the historical conditions of Besant’s life, grounding it “in the context of the Victorian crisis of faith and the social concerns it helped raise.”²⁵ Only such an effort to comprehend Besant in the midst of her personal relationships and ideological circumstances, rather than through the lens of predetermined frameworks or assumptions, has a real chance of interpreting her life fairly and helping us to better understand the many lives she touched. Perhaps a critic like Gauri Viswanathan, who is an historian of Empire, can open our eyes further by positing the intriguing thesis that “individual conversions are an index of cultural change,” that what “appears to be a shift from one doctrinal affiliation to another may well reveal not continuity but rather points of overlap and convergence.”²⁶ No matter what, however, we

25 Mark Bevir, “Annie Besant’s Quest for Truth: Christianity, Secularism and New Age Thought,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 50 (1999): 62; see also his *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999). For additional studies that factor Besant’s gender into religio-ideological history, see Catherine Wessinger, *Annie Besant and Progressive Messianism, 1847-1933* (Lewistown: Edwin Mellen Press, 1988), as well as Joy Dixon, “Sexology and the Occult: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Theosophy’s New Age,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7 (1997): 409-33.

26 Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1998), 185; see more broadly her chapter “Conversion, Theosophy, and Race Theory,” 177-207. Viswanathan thus opens up for our continued debate the primacy of multiple ideological confluence versus the coherence of personal unfolding. Besant’s forceful personality and the intolerance of many of her critics argue for uncovering hidden continuity—but not necessarily at the expense of also seeing in her complexity the complexity of a culture caught in the throes of extraordinary transition.

must return to Annie Besant's own words and to the multiple viewpoints from which she and others wrote about her, both during and after her lifetime, if we hope to sort out the convolutions of her existence. And in order to do so, we have to suspend our disbelief long enough to read her life newly each time we encounter it.

Annie Besant: A Brief Chronology

Key Events in the Life of Annie Besant

- 1847 Born Annie Wood in London (October 1).
- 1855 Begins private education with Ellen Marryat (through 1864).
- 1861 Travels on the continent with Miss Marryat.
- 1867 Marries Anglican clergyman Frank Besant.
- 1868 First published in *The Family Herald*.
- 1869 Son Digby born.
- 1871 Daughter Mabel born.
- 1873 Rejects Christianity and leaves her husband, taking Mabel with her.
- 1874 Joins the National Secular Society and begins working closely with its president, Charles Bradlaugh; first public lecture on "The Political Status of Women."
- 1877 On trial with Bradlaugh for publishing the Knowlton pamphlet on the subject of birth control.
- 1878 Sub-editor of *The National Reformer*.
- 1879 Determined by the courts to be an unfit mother and loses custody of Mabel; studies with Edward Aveling and pursues a degree in science at London University.
- 1883 Edits monthly journal *Our Corner* through 1888.
- 1885 Becomes a Socialist and joins the Fabian Society; publishes *Autobiographical Sketches*.
- 1887 Participates in open air meetings leading to Bloody Sunday; starts publishing *The Link* with William Stead.
- 1888 With Herbert Burrows helps the matchgirls of Bryant and May win their strike; elected to the London School Board (for three-year term).
- 1889 Reviews *The Secret Doctrine* and meets Mme. Blavatsky; joins the Theosophical Society.
- 1891 First lecture tour of the United States; succeeds Blavatsky as leader of the Theosophical Society in Europe and India.
- 1893 Publishes *An Autobiography*; represents the Theosophical Society at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago; visits India for the first time (thereafter her home).
- 1894 Lecture tours in India, Australia, and New Zealand; first address to the Indian National Congress.

- 1898 With Bhagavan Das, founds the Central Hindu College in Benares (it becomes the Central Hindu University in 1913).
- 1907 Elected worldwide president of the Theosophical Society (re-elected 1914, 1921, 1928).
- 1909 Jiddu Krishnamurti is discovered and chosen to be the future World Teacher.
- 1913 Besant actively engages in Indian politics, arguing for Dominion status within the British Commonwealth.
- 1914 Founds the weekly *Commonweal* and the daily *New India*.
- 1916 Founds the Home Rule League; establishes the Hindu Girls' College in Benares.
- 1917 Interned for three months; elected President of India's National Congress.
- 1924 Tribute to her fifty years of public service takes place in London.
- 1927 Delivers over fifty lectures in twelve countries, travelling much of the time by airplane.
- 1929 Krishnamurti disbands the Order of the Star and leaves the Theosophical Society.
- 1930 Besant presides over the Theosophical Society European Congress in Geneva.
- 1933 Dies in Adyar, India (September 20).

Relevant Landmark Events in British Political, Social, Educational, and Legal History

- 1832 First Reform Bill grants the vote to male householders with an annual income of £10.
- 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act establishes a national system of workhouses.
- 1836 Chartist Movement seeking parliamentary reform starts (running through 1848).
- 1845 Potato famine in Ireland; Corn Laws repealed.
- 1854 Christian Socialists found the Workingman's College at Red Lion Square, London.
- 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act establishes divorce courts and permits a wife deserted by her husband to keep her own earnings; the Obscene Publications Act (Lord Campbell's Act) places limits on freedom of the press.
- 1863 Cambridge Entrance Examination open to female students for the first time.

- 1867 Second Reform Bill extends franchise to workingmen other than agricultural workers.
- 1869 Hitchin (later Girton) College, Cambridge, founded as first women's university college.
- 1870 Married Women's Property Act permits married women living with their husbands to keep their own earnings; Education Act requires local authorities to provide schooling; women eligible for election to School Boards; First Irish Land Act.
- 1871 University Tests Act removes religious tests at Oxford and Cambridge; Trade Unions legalized.
- 1875 Higher Education Act allows universities to grant degrees to women.
- 1878 London University is the first university to make its degrees to open to women.
- 1880 Education Act provides compulsory schooling for all children up to the age of ten.
- 1881 Second Irish Land Act renews efforts to protect tenant farmers.
- 1882 Married Women's Property Act now permits married women to own their own property.
- 1884 Third Reform Bill extends vote to most male agricultural laborers.
- 1885 William Stead exposes the white slave trade in London in "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" (*Pall Mall Gazette*).
- 1886 Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts (first sought by Josephine Butler in 1869).
- 1888 Women allowed to vote in local elections; Affirmation Act finally allows Charles Bradlaugh to take his seat in Parliament as the Representative of Northampton.
- 1889 Women's Trade Union League founded.
- 1897 National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies founded; Workman's Compensation Act passed.
- 1903 Women's Social and Political Union established.
- 1907 Qualification of Women Act allows women to become local councilors.
- 1918 All men over twenty-one and women householders over the age of thirty get the vote.
- 1919 Sex Disqualification Removal Act grants women the right to become magistrates, jurors, barristers, and solicitors.
- 1920 Non-cooperation Program accepted by the India National Congress.

- 1921 Marie Stopes opens the first birth control clinic in Britain.
- 1922 Irish Free State established (first Irish Home Rule Bill rejected 1886).
- 1923 Matrimonial Causes Act finally allows a woman to obtain divorce for the same reasons as a man.
- 1925 Guardianship of Infants Act determines that men and women have equal rights over their children.
- 1928 Women granted the right to vote on equal terms with men.
- 1930 Mahatma Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Movement launched.
- 1947 India achieves full independence as a nation; partition from Pakistan established.

A Note on the Text

This edition is based on the sole book publication of Annie Besant's *Autobiographical Sketches*, which she co-published with Charles Bradlaugh under the imprint of their Freethought Publishing Company (London) at the end of 1885. For the previous year and a half, starting in January 1884 and running through June 1885 (there was no April installment), she published the seventeen sections of her autobiography in the monthly journal that she edited entitled *Our Corner*, which ran from 1883 to 1888. After careful examination of both the book and journal installments, I can find no differences between them (including typographical and other minor errors), suggesting that Besant preserved her original plates with the intent all along of reprinting the serialization in book form. The frontispiece portrait appeared only in the book edition. The book never went through another edition or reissue, although I have found some copies with end-matter advertisements dating from as late as May 1887 (it would not have been difficult for her to have more copies bound based on demand). *Autobiographical Sketches* has essentially become a rare book item, presumably superseded by her second version of her life story, *An Autobiography*, which has been kept in continual reprint by the Theosophical Society ever since its initial publication in 1893 by T. Fisher Unwin (London).

For this Broadview edition, all the original punctuation and spelling have been retained; the only corrections that have been made are silent emendations that supply missing punctuation or letter-type (in one case I have set a missing word in brackets). In general, Besant provided a very clean text, itself indicative of her sound editorial practices and attention to detail, both of which she directly addresses in the preface to the 1875 collection she edited of the *Secular Song and Hymn Book*, which I have reproduced in Appendix D2. Some inconsistencies remain with respect to the British style of using quotation marks, but I have chosen not to regularize or change them in the interest of providing the reader with a text that is as close as possible to the original publication. (This is in contradistinction to the appendices; since their primary texts reflect a variety of styles and publication practices, I have regularized their punctuation, although I have retained period spelling throughout.) Every effort has been made with the body of the main text to reproduce relative size and style of typeface as well as spacial configuration.

A few words on the notes to the main text: they are intended to provide the modern reader with most of the background necessary to understand the immediate context of the content of *Autobiographical Sketches* as well as to point to some of the implications raised by Besant's discussions of many complex legal, social, scientific, and religious issues. In particular, I have been struck by an atheist's thorough-going biblical erudition, and her knowledge of the law is equally impressive, especially since as a woman she was not privy to any formal legal education. The many names and references she introduces into the text have required extensive notation, and I have tried to combine entries whenever possible if they were generated within a single sentence. On only two occasions did Besant provide her own footnotes (VI.4 and XV.24), and in both cases they are clearly labelled as such. The notes themselves follow American spelling and punctuation practices; for additional or more complete references, the reader is directed to the select bibliography at the end of this volume.

Monthly installments of *Autobiographical Sketches* in *Our Corner* (1884-85)

Section I	Vol. 3, no. 1 (January 1884)	Pp. 1-5
Section II	Vol. 3, no. 2 (February 1884)	Pp. 65-77
Section III	Vol. 3, no. 3 (March 1884)	Pp. 129-37
Section IV	Vol. 3, no. 4 (April 1884)	Pp. 193-200
Section V	Vol. 3, no. 5 (May 1884)	Pp. 257-67
Section VI	Vol. 3, no. 6 (June 1884)	Pp. 321-30
Section VII	Vol. 4, no. 7 (July 1884)	Pp. 1-8
Section VIII	Vol. 4, no. 8 (August 1884)	Pp. 65-71
Section IX	Vol. 4, no. 9 (September 1884)	Pp. 129-34
Section X	Vol. 4, no. 10 (October 1884)	Pp. 193-201
Section XI	Vol. 4, no. 11 (November 1884)	Pp. 257-64
Section XII	Vol. 4, no. 12 (December 1884)	Pp. 321-21
Section XIII	Vol. 5, no. 1 (January 1885)	Pp. 25-33
Section XIV	Vol. 5, no. 2 (February 1885)	Pp. 79-89
Section XV	Vol. 5, no. 3 (March 1885)	Pp. 129-37
	[no installment 5.4 (April 1885)]	
Section XVI	Vol. 5, no. 5 (May 1885)	Pp. 283-94
Section XVII	Vol. 5, no. 6 (June 1885)	Pp. 320-28

Every monthly issue of *Our Corner* ran to 64 pages, and with three exceptions over the period that Besant serialized *Autobiographical Sketches*, she began each issue with an installment of her life story (she was ill mid-March 1885 and made no contribution to her autobiographical serial for the subsequent issue, even though the journal itself was published that month). Each issue was dated the first day of the month, and although the issues were initially numbered 1-6 for each volume, I have elected to use the numbering system employed for the bound volumes, reflecting what is now available in libraries and hence through inter-library-loan (that is, half-way through each year the even-numbered volumes run 7-12 for their installments). Readers interested in seeing individual sections of *Autobiographical Sketches* in the context of their monthly installments in *Our Corner* will find hard copy in a handful of American university and public libraries; see the *Union List of Serials in Libraries of the United States and Canada*, 3rd ed., v. 4 (New York: H.W. Wilson Co., 1965), although there were no listings for Canada at that time. Both the British Library (London) and the Bodleian Library (Oxford) have complete runs as well. Two microform sources are also available for purchase or interlibrary loan: see University Microfilms International, *Early British Periodicals Series* (Xerox Co.: Ann Arbor, 1979), reels 225-26, and *Rare Radical and Labour Periodicals of Great Britain*, Part II: *Marxism and the Machine Age, 1867-1914* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Co., 1983), 2 reels. The entries for each volume are indexed according to title or department, and the index is always found at the head of each volume, thus serving as a table of contents. Google Book Search has recently made available on the internet the third volume (Jan.-June 1884), taken from the copy at the New York Public Library; this volume contains the first six months (or one third) of *Autobiographical Sketches*. For further information that is regularly updated, see *The Nineteenth Century Index*, online at <C19index.chadwyck.com/marketing/index.jsp>.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES.

BY
ANNIE BESANT



LONDON:
FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY,
63, FLEET STREET, E.C.

—
1885.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES.

I am so often asked for references to some pamphlet or journal in which may be found some outline of my life, and the enquiries are so often couched in terms of such real kindness, that I have resolved to pen a few brief autobiographical sketches, which may avail to satisfy friendly questioners, and to serve, in some measure, as defence against unfair attack.

I.

On October 1st, 1847, I made my appearance in this “vale of tears”, “little Pheasantina”, as I was irreverently called by a giddy aunt, a pet sister of my mother’s. Just at that time my father and mother were staying within the boundaries of the City of London, so that I was born well “within the sound of Bow bells”.¹

Though born in London, however, full three quarters of my blood are Irish. My dear mother was a Morris—the spelling of the name having been changed from Maurice some five generations back—and I have often heard her tell a quaint story, illustrative of that family pride which is so common a feature of a decayed Irish family.² She was one of a large family, and her father and mother, gay, handsome, and extravagant, had wasted merrily what remained to them of patrimony.³ I can remember

1 The Bow bells of St. Mary-le-Bow, in Cheapside, were rung daily to conclude the work day and every evening at 9 o’clock; an authentic Cockney claims to be born “within the sound of Bow bells.” The neighborhood was centrally located in the City of London, near to both the banking and commercial districts.

2 Her full name was Emily Roche Morris Wood (d. 1874).

3 Patrimony here refers to family inheritance, rather than estate or landed property; both of Annie’s grandparents on her mother’s side had emigrated from Ireland to England, where their second daughter Emily was born.

her father well, for I was fourteen years of age when he died. A bent old man, with hair like driven snow, splendidly handsome in his old age, hot-tempered to passion at the lightest provocation, loving and wrath in quick succession. As the family grew larger and the means grew smaller, many a pinch came on the household, and the parents were glad to accept the offer of a relative to take charge of Emily, the second daughter. A very proud old lady was this maiden aunt, and over the mantel-piece of her drawing-room ever hung a great diagram, a family tree, which mightily impressed the warm imagination of the delicate child she had taken in charge. It was a lengthy and well-grown family tree, tracing back the Morris family to the days of Charlemagne, and branching out from a stock of "the seven kings of France".⁴ Was there ever yet a decayed Irish family that did not trace itself back to some "kings"? and these "Milesian kings"—who had been expelled from France, doubtless for good reasons, and who had sailed across the sea and landed in fair Erin, and there had settled and robbed and fought—did more good 800 years after their death than they did, I expect, during their ill-spent lives, if they proved a source of gentle harmless pride to the old maiden lady who admired their names over her mantelpiece in the earlier half of the present century. And, indeed, they acted as a kind of moral thermometer, in a fashion that would much have astonished their illdoing and barbarous selves. For my mother has told me how when she would commit some piece of childish naughtiness, her aunt would say, looking gravely over her spectacles at the small culprit: "Emily, your conduct is unworthy of the descendant of the seven kings of France." And Emily, with her sweet grey Irish eyes, and her curling masses of raven-black hair, would cry in penitent shame over her unworthiness, with some vague idea that those royal, and to her very real ancestors, would despise her small sweet rosebud self, as wholly unworthy of their disreputable majesties. But that same maiden aunt trained the child right well, and I keep ever grateful memory of her, though I never knew her, for her share in forming the tenderest, sweetest, proudest, purest, noblest woman I have ever known. I have never met a woman more selflessly devoted to those she loved, more passionately contemptuous of all that was mean or base, more keenly sensitive

4 Legend has it that the seven Milesian kings came to Ireland circa 1300 BCE; however, they travelled not from France but from Spain, itself an intermediary station in a migratory route from Scythia by way of Egypt and Crete.

on every question of honor, more iron in will, more sweet in tenderness, than the mother who made my girlhood sunny as dreamland, who guarded me until my marriage from every touch of pain that she could ward off, or could bear for me, who suffered more in every trouble that touched me in later life than I did myself, and who died in the little house I had taken for our new home in Norwood, worn out ere old age touched her, by sorrow, poverty and pain, in May, 1874.

Of my father⁵ my memory is less vivid, for he died when I was but five years old. He was of mixed race, English on his father's side, Irish on his mother's, and was born in Galway, and educated in Ireland; he took his degree at Dublin University, and walked the hospitals as a medical student. But after he had qualified as a medical man a good appointment was offered him by a relative in the City of London, and he never practised regularly as a doctor.

In the City his prospects were naturally promising; the elder branch of the Wood family, to which he belonged, had for many generations been settled in Devonshire, farming their own land. When the eldest son William, my father, came of age, he joined with his father to cut off the entail,⁶ and the old acres were sold. Meanwhile members of other branches had entered commercial life, and had therein prospered exceedingly. One of them had become Lord Mayor of London,⁷ had vigorously supported the unhappy Queen Caroline, had paid the debts of the Duke of Kent, in order that that reputable individual might return to England with his Duchess, so that the future heir to the throne might be born on English soil; he had been rewarded with a baronetcy as a cheap method of paying his services. Another, my father's first cousin once removed, a

5 William Burton Persse Wood (d. 1852), son of Robert Wright Wood and Emily Trueman, earned his medical degree at Trinity College, part of Dublin University.

6 An entail ruling refers to a property that is restricted to a fixed line of descent, usually conveyed through seniority and male inheritance to ensure that a family estate is not subdivided but kept intact through multiple generations.

7 William's uncle, Matthew Wood (1768-1843), was twice chosen Lord Mayor of London, in 1815 and 1816, after which he served as a Member of Parliament (MP hereafter) for the remainder of his life. By helping to repay the debts of the Duke of Kent, he ensured the duke's safe return to England, where his daughter, the future Queen Victoria (1812-1901), was born.

young barrister,⁸ had successfully pleaded a suit in which was concerned the huge fortune of a miserly relative, and had thus laid the foundations of a great success; he won for himself a vice-chancellorship and a knighthood, and then the Lord Chancellorship of England, with the barony of Hatherley. A third, a brother of the last, Western Wood, was doing good service in the House of Commons. A fourth, a cousin of the last two, had thrown himself with such spirit and energy into mining work, that he had accumulated a fortune. In fact all the scattered branches had made their several ways in the world, save that elder one to which my father belonged. That had vegetated on down in the country, and had grown poorer while the others grew richer. My father's brothers had somewhat of a fight for life. One has prospered and is comfortable and well-to-do. The other led for years a rough and wandering life, and "came to grief" generally. Some years ago I heard of him as a store-keeper in Portsmouth dock-yard, occasionally boasting in feeble fashion that his cousin was Lord Chancellor of England, and not many months since I heard from him in South Africa, where he has secured some appointment in the Commissariat Department, not, I fear, of a very lucrative character.

Let us come back to Pheasantina, who, I am told, was a delicate and somewhat fractious infant, giving to both father and mother considerable cause for anxiety. Her first attempts at rising in the world were attended with disaster, for as she was lying in a cradle, with carved iron canopy, and was for a moment left by her nurse in full faith that she could not rise from the recumbent position, Miss Pheasantina determined to show that she was capable of unexpected independence, and made a vigorous struggle to assume that upright position which is the proud prerogative of man. In another moment the recumbent position was re-assumed, and the nurse returning found the baby's face covered with blood, streaming from a severe wound on the forehead, the iron fretwork having proved harder than the baby's head. The scar remains down to the present time, and gives me the valuable peculiarity of only wrinkling up one side of my forehead when I raise my eyebrows, a feat that I defy any of my readers to emulate. The heavy cut has, I suppose, so injured the muscles in that spot that they have lost the normal power of contraction.

My earliest personal recollections are of a house and garden

8 William Page Wood (1801-81); as Lord Chancellor, he presided over the House of Lords and acted as chief of the judiciary.

that we lived in when I was three and four years of age, situated in Grove Road, St. John's Wood. I can remember my mother hovering round the dinner-table to see that all was bright for the home-coming husband; my brother⁹—two years older than myself—and I watching “for papa”; the loving welcome, the game of romps that always preceded the dinner of the elder folks. I can remember on the first of October, 1851, jumping up in my little cot, and shouting out triumphantly: “Papa! mamma! I am four years old!” and the grave demand of my brother, conscious of superior age, at dinner-time: “May not Annie have a knife to-day, as she is four years old?”

It was a sore grievance during that same year 1851, that I was not judged old enough to go to the Great Exhibition,¹⁰ and I have a faint memory of my brother consolingly bringing me home one of those folding pictured strips that are sold in the streets, on which were imaged glories that I longed only the more to see. Far-away, dusky, trivial memories, these. What a pity it is that a baby cannot notice, cannot observe, cannot remember, and so throw light on the fashion of the dawning of the external world on the human consciousness. If only we could remember how things looked when they were first imaged on the retina; what we felt when first we became conscious of the outer world; what the feeling was as faces of father and mother grew out of the surrounding chaos and became familiar things, greeted with a smile, lost with a cry; if only memory would not become a mist when in later years we strive to throw our glances backward into the darkness of our infancy, what lessons we might learn to help our stumbling psychology, how many questions might be solved whose answers we are groping for in vain.

II.

The next scene that stands out clearly against the background of the past is that of my father's death-bed. The events which led to his death I know from my dear mother. He had never lost his

9 Henry (“Harry”) Trueman Wood (1845–1929) graduated from Clare College, Cambridge, and in 1890 was knighted for his services as British Commissioner for the 1889 Paris Exhibition.

10 The Great Exhibition was organized in Hyde Park, London, by Prince Albert in 1851 to showcase British technical accomplishments at home and wealth abroad; its chief architectural feature was the gigantic glass and steel structure called the Crystal Palace.

fondness for the profession for which he had been trained, and having many medical friends, he would now and then accompany them on their hospital rounds, or share with them the labors of the dissecting room. It chanced that during the dissection of the body of a person who had died of rapid consumption, my father cut his finger against the edge of the breast-bone. The cut did not heal easily, and the finger became swollen and inflamed. "I would have that finger off, Wood, if I were you," said one of the surgeons, a day or two afterwards, on seeing the state of the wound. But the others laughed at the suggestion, and my father, at first inclined to submit to the amputation, was persuaded to "leave Nature alone".

About the middle of August, 1852, he got wet through, riding on the top of an omnibus,¹ and the wetting resulted in a severe cold, which "settled on his chest". One of the most eminent doctors of the day, as able as he was rough in manner, was called to see him. He examined him carefully, sounded his lungs, and left the room followed by my mother. "Well?" she asked, scarcely anxious as to the answer, save as it might worry her husband to be kept idly at home. "You must keep up his spirits", was the thoughtless answer. "He is in a galloping consumption;² you will not have him with you six weeks longer." The wife staggered back, and fell like a stone on the floor. But love triumphed over agony, and half an hour later she was again at her husband's side, never to leave it again for ten minutes at a time, night or day, till he was lying with closed eyes asleep in death.

I was lifted on to the bed to "say good-bye to dear Papa" on the day before his death, and I remember being frightened at his eyes which looked so large, and his voice which sounded so strange, as he made me promise always to be "a very good girl to darling Mamma, as Papa was going right away". I remember insisting that "Papa should kiss Cherry", a doll given me on my birthday, three days before, by his direction, and being removed,

1 An omnibus is a large public vehicle designed to carry a considerable number of passengers; in the mid-1850s it would not yet be automated but drawn by two or more horses; usually a two-decker vehicle in Britain, it is abbreviated today as "bus."

2 Consumption here refers to the progressive wasting away of the body, especially the disabling stage of pulmonary tuberculosis characterized by massive destruction of lung tissue and systematic toxemia; the term was often used in the nineteenth century in a general, rather than precise, sense. The application of quinine proved fruitless, and little could be done to cure the disease before the advent of penicillin.

crying and struggling, from the room. He died on the following day, October 5th, and I do not think that my elder brother and I—who were staying at our maternal grandfather's—went to the house again until the day of the funeral. With the death, my mother broke down, and when all was over they carried her senseless from the room. I remember hearing afterwards how, when she recovered her senses, she passionately insisted on being left alone, and locked herself into her room for the night; and how on the following morning her mother, at last persuading her to open the door, started back at the face she saw with the cry: "Good God! Emily! your hair is white!" It was even so; her hair, black, glossy and abundant, which, contrasting with her large grey eyes, had made her face so strangely attractive, had turned grey in that night of agony, and to me my mother's face is ever framed in exquisite silver bands of hair as white as the driven unsullied snow.

I have heard that the love between my father and mother was a very beautiful thing, and it most certainly stamped her character for life. He was keenly intellectual and splendidly educated; a mathematician and a good classical scholar, thoroughly master of French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, with a smattering of Hebrew and Gaelic, the treasures of ancient and of modern literature were his daily household delight. Nothing pleased him so well as to sit with his wife, reading aloud to her while she worked; now translating from some foreign poet, now rolling forth melodiously the exquisite cadences of *Queen Mab*.³ Student of philosophy as he was, he was deeply and steadily sceptical; and a very religious relative has told me that he often drove her from the room by his light playful mockery of the tenets of the Christian faith. His mother and sister were strict Roman Catholics, and near the end forced a priest into his room, but the priest was promptly ejected by the wrath of the dying man, and by the almost fierce resolve of the wife that no messenger of the creed he detested should trouble her darling at the last.

This scepticism of his was not wholly shared by his wife, who held to the notion that women should be "religious," while men might philosophise as they would; but it so deeply influenced her own intellectual life that she utterly rejected the most irrational dogmas of Christianity, such as eternal punishment, the vicarious

3 The exalted rhetoric of *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem*, published in 1813 by Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), elevated it for many to the status of a freethinking and socialistic gospel.

atonement of Christ, the doctrine that faith is necessary to salvation, the equality of Christ with God, the infallibility of the Bible; she made morality of life, not orthodoxy of belief, her measure of “religion”; she was “a Christian”, in her own view of the matter, but it was a Christian of the school of Jowett, of Colenso, and of Stanley.⁴ The latter writer had for her, in after years, the very strongest fascination, and I am not sure that his “variegated use of words”, so fiercely condemned by Dr. Pusey,⁵ did not exactly suit her own turn of mind, which shrank back intellectually from the crude dogmas of orthodox Christianity, but clung poetically to the artistic side of religion, to its art and to its music, to the grandeur of its glorious fanes, and the solemnity of its stately ritual. She detested the meretricious show, the tinsel gaudiness, the bowing and genuflecting, the candles and the draperies, of Romanism, and of its pinchbeck⁶ imitator Ritualism; but I doubt whether she knew any keener pleasure than to sit in one of the carved stalls of Westminster Abbey, listening to the polished sweetness of Dean Stanley’s exquisite eloquence; or to the thunder of the organ mingled with the voices of the white-robed choristers, as the music rose and fell, as it pealed up to the arched

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- 4 The Atonement of Christ refers to the theological doctrine in Christianity which concerns the reconciliation of God and man through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ; see Appendix B4 for Gladstone’s review of Annie Besant’s *An Autobiography* (1893) entitled “The Atonement.” Professor Benjamin Jowett (1817–93), master of Balliol College, Oxford, was recognized for his translation of Plato and his theological liberalism. John William Colenso (1814–83), known as the heretic bishop of Natal, challenged orthodox Christianity with his views on polygamy, eternal punishment, and the traditional interpretation of the Pentateuch (the first five books of the New Testament). Arthur Benrhyn Stanley (1815–81) was installed in 1863 as Dean of Westminster Abbey, a position he utilized to promote his ideal of a comprehensive national church, one that symbolized the harmony in diversity (something that Annie would welcome in Theosophy); it was in this spirit that he opposed any effort to diminish the tie between church and state.
- 5 Dr. Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800–82), professor of Hebrew at Oxford and canon of Christ Church, was a primary leader of the Oxford Movement, or Tractarianism, which attempted to return the Church of England to the doctrines espoused by the early Anglican divines, essentially reaffirming many tenets of Roman Catholicism. Fanés are temples or churches.
- 6 Pinchbeck was a cheap alloy of copper and zinc used to imitate gold, especially in jewelry, hence something counterfeit or spurious.

roof and lost itself in the carven fretwork, or died away softly among the echoes of the chapels in which kings and saints and sages lay sleeping, enshrining in themselves the glories and the sorrows of the past.

To return to October, 1852. On the day of the funeral my elder brother and I were taken back to the house where my father lay dead, and while my brother went as chief mourner,⁷ poor little boy swamped in crape and miserable exceedingly, I sat in an upstairs room with my mother and her sisters; and still comes back to me her figure, seated on a sofa, with fixed white face and dull vacant eyes, counting the minutes till the funeral procession would have reached Kensal Green, and then following in mechanical fashion, prayer-book⁸ in hand, the service, stage by stage, until to my unspeakable terror, with the words, dully spoken, "It is all over", she fell back fainting. And here comes a curious psychological problem which has often puzzled me. Some weeks later she resolved to go and see her husband's grave. A relative who had been present at the funeral volunteered to guide her to the spot, but lost his way in that wilderness of graves. Another of the small party went off to find one of the officials and to enquire, and my mother said: "If you will take me to the chapel where the first part of the service was read, I will find the grave". To humor her whim, he led her thither, and, looking round for a moment or two, she started from the chapel, followed the path along which the corpse had been borne, and was standing by the newly-made grave when the official arrived to point it out. Her own explanation was that she had seen all the service; what is certain is, that she had never been to Kensal Green before, and that she walked steadily to the grave from the chapel. Whether the spot had been carefully described to her, whether she had heard others talking of its position or not, we could never ascertain; she had no remembrance of any such description, and the matter always remained to us a problem. But after the lapse of years a

7 According to social custom in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, women (and female children) were prohibited from attending funerals because it was assumed that they would be too emotional; hence, neither Mrs. Wood nor Annie attended the funeral or participated in the burial procession for Mr. Wood.

8 The Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England, first mandated in 1549, contains the prayers and forms of worship used in official services as well as private devotionals; the Prayer Book of 1662 is still in use today.

hundred little things may have been forgotten which unconsciously served as guides at the time. She must have been, of course, at that time, in a state of abnormal nervous excitation, a state of which another proof was shortly afterwards given. The youngest of our little family was a boy about three years younger than myself, a very beautiful child, blue-eyed and golden haired—I have still a lock of his hair, of exquisite pale golden hue—and the little lad was passionately devoted to his father. He was always a delicate boy, and had I suppose, therefore, been specially petted, and he fretted continually for “papa”. It is probable that the consumptive taint had touched him, for he pined steadily away, with no marked disease, during the winter months. One morning my mother calmly stated: “Alf is going to die”. It was in vain that it was urged on her that with the spring strength would return to the child. “No”, she persisted. “He was lying asleep in my arms last night, and William came to me and said that he wanted Alf with him, but that I might keep the other two.” She had in her a strong strain of Celtic superstition, and thoroughly believed that this “vision”—a most natural dream under the circumstances—was a direct “warning”, and that her husband had come to her to tell her of her approaching loss. This belief was, in her eyes, thoroughly justified by the little fellow’s death in the following March, calling to the end for “Papa! papa!” My brother and I were allowed to see him just before he was placed in his coffin; I can see him still, so white and beautiful, with a black spot in the middle of the fair waxen forehead, and I remember the deadly cold which startled me when I was told to kiss my little brother. It was the first time that I had touched Death. That black spot made a curious impression on me, and long afterwards, asking what had caused it, I was told that at the moment after his death my mother had passionately kissed the baby brow. Pathetic thought, that the mother’s kiss of farewell should have been marked by the first sign of corruption on the child’s face.

And now began my mother’s time of struggle and of anxiety. Hitherto, since her marriage, she had known no money troubles, for her husband was earning a good income; he was apparently vigorous and well: no thought of anxiety clouded their future. When he died, he believed that he left his wife and children safe, at least, from pecuniary distress. It was not so. I know nothing of the details, but the outcome of all was that nothing was left for the widow and children, save a trifle of ready money. The resolve to which my mother came was characteristic. Two of her husband’s relatives, Western and Sir William Wood, offered to

educate her son at a good city school, and to start him in commercial life, using their great city influence to push him forward. But the young lad's father and mother had talked of a different future for their eldest boy; he was to go to a public school, and then to the University, and was to enter one of the "learned professions"—to take orders, the mother wished; to go to the Bar, the father hoped.⁹ On his death-bed there was nothing more earnestly urged by my father than that Harry should receive the best possible education, and the widow was resolute to fulfil that last wish. In her eyes, a city school was not "the best possible education", and the Irish pride rebelled against the idea of her son not being "a University man". Many were the lectures poured out on the young widow's head about her "foolish pride", especially by the female members of the Wood family; and her persistence in her own way caused a considerable alienation between herself and them. But Western and William, though half-disapproving, remained her friends, and lent many a helping hand to her in her first difficult struggles. After much cogitation, she resolved that the boy should be educated at Harrow,¹⁰ where the fees are comparatively low to lads living in the town, and that he should go thence to Cambridge or to Oxford, as his tastes should direct. A bold scheme for a penniless widow, but carried out to the letter;

9 In Britain, a public school is usually a private secondary school for boys; well-established public schools like Eton or Rugby provide instruction in a classical curriculum preparatory for attendance at one of the universities or for public service. The University is an institution of higher learning which has the authority to grant academic degrees; in Britain at this time it signified either Oxford or Cambridge, each of which consisted of a number of distinct colleges, which were sometimes summed up by the fanciful coinage "Oxbridge." To take orders in this case is to be ordained a minister of the Church of England; it involves subscribing to the Thirty-nine Articles, the doctrinal statements partly derived from the 1538 accord reached between Henry VIII and the German Lutheran princes. To go to the Bar is to study law and become a barrister (equivalent of the American lawyer); the bar refers to the railing in a courtroom that encloses the area where the business of the court is conducted, and a barrister is a counsel who has been admitted to plead at the bar and undertake public trials.

10 Harrow School, founded in 1611, is one of Britain's foremost public schools; it allowed for both house boarders and "town boys"—that is, boys who lived at home or some other approved lodging—and from its inception it yearly set aside funds for the education of poor children in Harrow.

for never dwelt in a delicate body a more resolute mind and will than that of my dear mother.

In a few months' time—during which we lived, poorly enough, in Richmond Terrace, Clapham, close to her father and mother—to Harrow, then, she betook herself, into lodgings over a grocer's shop, and set herself to look for a house. This grocer was a very pompous man, fond of long words, and patronised the young widow exceedingly, and one day my mother related with much amusement how he had told her that she was sure to get on if she worked hard. "Look at me!" he said swelling visibly with importance; "I was once a poor boy, without a penny of my own, and now I am a comfortable man, and have my submarine villa to go to every evening". That "submarine villa" was an object of amusement when we passed it in our walks for many a long day. "There is Mr. —'s submarine villa", some one would say, laughing: and I, too, used to laugh merrily, because my elders did, though my understanding of the difference between suburban and submarine was on a par with that of the honest grocer.

My mother had fortunately found a boy, whose parents were glad to place him in her charge, of about the age of her own son, to educate with him; and by this means she was able to pay for a tutor, to prepare the two boys for school. The tutor had a cork leg, which was a source of serious trouble to me, for it stuck out straight behind when we knelt down to family prayers—conduct which struck me as irreverent and unbecoming, but which I always felt a desire to imitate. After about a year, my mother found a house which she thought would suit her scheme, namely, to obtain permission from Dr. Vaughan, the then Head Master of Harrow,¹¹ to take some boys into her house, and so gain means of education for her own son. Dr. Vaughan, who must have been won by the gentle, strong, little woman, from that time forth became her earnest friend and helper; and to the counsel and active assistance both of himself and of his wife, was due much of the success that crowned her toil. He made only one condition in granting the permission she asked, and that was, that she should also have in her house one of the masters of the school, so that the boys should not suffer from the want of a

11 Dr. Charles John Vaughan (1816-97) was Head Master, or principal, of Harrow from 1844 to 1859; he was largely responsible for making it one of the premiere public schools of its time, his own leadership skills reflecting a balance between teaching and preaching.

house-tutor.¹² This condition, of course, she readily accepted, and the arrangement lasted for ten years, until after her son had left school for Cambridge.

The house she took is now, I am sorry to say, pulled down, and replaced by a hideous red-brick structure. It was very old and rambling, rose-covered in front, ivy-covered behind; it stood on the top of Harrow Hill, between the church and the school, and had once been the vicarage of the parish, but the vicar had left it because it was so far removed from the part of the village where all his work lay. The drawing-room opened by an old-fashioned half-window, half-door—which proved a constant source of grief to me, for whenever I had on a new frock I always tore it on the bolt as I flew through it—into a large garden which sloped down one side of the hill, and was filled with the most delightful old trees, fir and laurel, may, mulberry, hazel, apple, pear, and damson, not to mention currant and gooseberry bushes innumerable, and large strawberry beds spreading down the sunny slopes. There was not a tree there that I did not climb, and one, a widespreading Portugal laurel, was my private country house. I had there my bedroom and my sitting-rooms, my study, and my larder. The larder was supplied by the fruit-trees, from which I was free to pick as I would, and in the study I would sit for hours with some favorite book—Milton’s “*Paradise Lost*”¹³ the chief favorite of all. The birds must often have felt startled, when from the small swinging form perching on a branch, came out in childish tones the “Thrones, dominations, principedoms, virtues, powers”, of Milton’s stately and sonorous verse. I liked to personify Satan, and to declaim the grand speeches of the hero-rebel, and many a happy hour did I pass in Milton’s heaven and hell, with for companions Satan and “the Son”, Gabriel and Abdiel.¹⁴ Then there was a terrace running by the side of the churchyard, always dry in the wettest weather, and bordered by

12 A house-tutor was an officially assigned tutor to public school boys who lived in the same boarding facility.

13 *Paradise Lost* (1667), by the Puritan poet John Milton (1608-74), is considered to be his masterpiece; the quotation that follows is a refrain that recurs in Book V, lines 601, 772, and 840, as well as in Book X, line 460.

14 “The Son” is used in reference to Jesus Christ; Gabriel, one of the seven biblical archangels and herald of good tidings, is presumed to blow the trumpet on Judgment Day, while Abdiel, signifying “Servant of God,” was the son of Guni of the tribe of Gad (I Chronicles 5:15).

an old wooden fence, over which clambered roses of every shade; never was such a garden for roses as that of the Old Vicarage. At the end of the terrace was a little summer-house, and in this a trap-door in the fence, which swung open and displayed one of the fairest views in England. Sheer from your feet downwards went the hill, and then far below stretched the wooded country till your eye reached the towers of Windsor Castle,¹⁵ far away on the horizon. It was the view at which Byron was never tired of gazing, as he lay on the flat tombstone close by—Byron's tomb, as it is still called—of which he wrote:

“Again I behold where for hours I have pondered,
As reclining, at eve, on yon tombstone I lay,
Or round the steep brow of the churchyard I wandered,
To catch the last gleam of the sun's setting ray.”¹⁶

Reader mine, if ever you go to Harrow, ask permission to enter the old garden, and try the effect of that sudden burst of beauty, as you swing back the small trap-door at the terrace end.

Into this house we moved on my eighth birthday, and for eleven years it was “home” to me, left always with regret, returned to always with joy.

Almost immediately afterwards I left my mother for the first time; for one day, visiting a family who lived close by, I found a stranger sitting in the drawing-room, a lame lady with a strong face, which softened marvellously as she smiled at the child who came dancing in; she called me to her presently, and took me on her lap and talked to me, and on the following day our friend came to see my mother, to ask if she would let me go away and be educated with this lady's niece, coming home for the holidays regularly, but leaving my education in her hands. At first my mother would not hear of it, for she and I scarcely ever left each

15 Windsor Castle, one of the residences of the royal family, dates back to Saxon times in the ninth century; it contains a royal mausoleum that was restored by Queen Victoria and named in memory of her husband, Prince Albert (1819-61).

16 This is the fourth stanza from “On a Distant View of the Village and School of Harrow on the Hill” (1806), by George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824). Other poems by Byron about his old school setting include “Lines on a Change of Masters at Harrow,” “Lines Written beneath an Elm in the Churchyard of Harrow,” and “On Revisiting Harrow.”

other; my love for her was an idolatry, hers for me a devotion. [A foolish little story, about which I was unmercifully teased for years, marked that absolute idolatry of her, which has not yet faded from my heart. In tenderest rallying one day of the child who trotted after her everywhere, content to sit, or stand, or wait, if only she might touch hand or dress of “mamma,” she said: “Little one (the name by which she always called me), if you cling to mamma in this way, I must really get a string and tie you to my apron, and how will you like that?” “O mamma darling,” came the fervent answer, “do let it be in a knot.” And, indeed, the tie of love between us was so tightly knotted that nothing ever loosened it till the sword of Death cut that which pain and trouble never availed to slacken in the slightest degree.] But it was urged upon her that the advantages of education offered were such as no money could purchase for me; that it would be a disadvantage for me to grow up in a houseful of boys—and, in truth, I was as good a cricketer and climber as the best of them—that my mother would soon be obliged to send me to school, unless she accepted an offer which gave me every advantage of school without its disadvantages. At last she yielded, and it was decided that Miss Marryat,¹⁷ on returning home, should take me with her.

Miss Marryat—the favorite sister of Captain Marryat, the famous novelist—was a maiden lady of large means. She had nursed her brother through the illness that ended in his death, and had been living with her mother at Wimbledon Park. On her mother’s death she looked round for work which would make her useful in the world, and finding that one of her brothers had a large family of girls, she offered to take charge of one of them, and to educate her thoroughly. Chancing to come to Harrow, my good fortune threw me in her way, and she took a fancy to me and thought she would like to teach two little girls rather than one. Hence her offer to my mother.

Miss Marryat had a perfect genius for teaching, and took in it the greatest delight. From time to time she added another child to our party, sometimes a boy, sometimes a girl. At first, with Amy Marryat and myself, there was a little boy, Walter Powys, son of a clergyman with a large family, and him she trained for some years,

17 Ellen Marryat was one of fifteen sons and daughters, ten of whom lived to maturity, and the youngest sister of Captain Frederick Marryat (1792-1848), author of many novels of naval adventure as well as the editor of the *Metropolitan Magazine* in the 1830s; he later devoted himself to writing popular children’s literature.

and then sent him on to school admirably prepared. She chose “her children”—as she loved to call us—in very definite fashion. Each must be gently born and gently trained, but in such position that the education freely given should be a relief and aid to a slender parental purse. It was her delight to seek out and aid those on whom poverty presses most heavily, when the need for education for the children weighs on the proud and the poor. “Auntie” we all called her, for she thought “Miss Marryat” seemed too cold and stiff. She taught us everything herself except music, and for this she had a master, practising us in composition, in recitation, in reading aloud English and French, and later, German, devoting herself to training us in the soundest, most thorough fashion. No words of mine can tell how much I owe her, not only of knowledge, but of that love of knowledge which has remained with me, ever since as a constant spur to study.

Her method of teaching may be of interest to some, who desire to train children with the least pain, and the most enjoyment to the little ones themselves. First, we never used a spelling-book—that torment of the small child—nor an English grammar. But we wrote letters, telling of the things we had seen in our walks, or told again some story we had read; these childish compositions she would read over with us, correcting all faults of spelling, of grammar, of style, of cadence; a clumsy sentence would be read aloud, that we might hear how unmusical it sounded; an error in observation or expression pointed out. Then, as the letters recorded what we had seen the day before, the faculty of observation was drawn out and trained. “Oh, dear! I have nothing to say!” would come from a small child, hanging over a slate. “Did you not go out for a walk yesterday?” Auntie would question. “Yes”, would be sighed out; “but there’s nothing to say about it”. “Nothing to say! And you walked in the lanes for an hour and saw nothing, little No-eyes? You must use your eyes better to-day.” Then there was a very favorite “lesson”, which proved an excellent way of teaching spelling. We used to write out lists of all the words we could think of, which sounded the same but were differently spelt. Thus: “key, quay,” “knight, night,” and so on; and great was the glory of the child who found the largest number. Our French lessons—as the German later—included reading from the very first. On the day on which we began German we began reading Schiller’s “*Wilhelm Tell*,”¹⁸ and

18 Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805) produced his classical drama *Wilhelm Tell* in 1804; its themes deal with the search for moral and political freedom.

the verbs given to us to copy out were those that had occurred in the reading. We learned much by heart, but always things that in themselves were worthy to be learned. We were never given the dry questions and answers which lazy teachers so much affect. We were taught history by one reading aloud while the others worked—the boys as well as the girls learning the use of the needle. “It’s like a girl to sew,” said a little fellow, indignantly, one day. “It is like a baby to have to run after a girl if you want a button sewn on,” quoth Auntie. Geography was learned by painting skeleton maps—an exercise much delighted in by small fingers—and by putting together puzzle maps, in which countries in the map of a continent, or counties in the map of a country, were always cut out in their proper shapes. I liked big empires in those days; there was a solid satisfaction in putting down Russia, and seeing what a large part of the map was filled up thereby.

The only grammar that we ever learned as grammar was the Latin, and that not until composition had made us familiar with the use of the rules therein given. Auntie had a great horror of children learning by rote things they did not understand, and then fancying they knew them. “What do you mean by that expression, Annie?” she would ask me. After feeble attempts to explain, I would answer: “Indeed, Auntie, I know in my own head, but I can’t explain”. “Then, indeed, Annie, you do not know in your own head, or you could explain, so that I might know in my own head.” And so a healthy habit was fostered of clearness of thought and of expression. The Latin grammar was used because it was more perfect than the modern grammars, and served as a solid foundation for modern languages.

Miss Marryat took a beautiful place, Fern Hill, near Charmouth, in Dorsetshire, on the borders of Devon, and there she lived for some five years, a centre of beneficence in the district. She started a Sunday-school, and a Bible-class after a while for the lads too old for the school, who clamored for admission to her class in it. She visited the poor, taking help wherever she went, and sending food from her own table to the sick. It was characteristic of her that she would never give “scraps” to the poor, but would have a basin brought in at dinner, and would cut the best slice to tempt the invalid appetite. Money she rarely, if ever, gave, but she would find a day’s work, or busy herself to seek permanent employment for anyone asking aid. Stern in rectitude herself, and iron to the fawning or the dishonest, her influence, whether she was feared or loved, was always for good. Of the strictest sect of the Evangelicals, she was

an Evangelical.¹⁹ On the Sunday no books were allowed save the Bible or the “Sunday at Home”;²⁰ but she would try to make the day bright by various little devices; by a walk with her in the garden; by the singing of hymns, always attractive to children; by telling us wonderful missionary stories of Moffat and Livingstone, whose adventures with savages and wild beasts were as exciting as any tale of Mayne Reid’s.²¹ We used to learn passages from the Bible and hymns for repetition; a favorite amusement was a “Bible puzzle”, such as a description of some Bible scene, which was to be recognised by the description. Then we taught in the Sunday-school, for Auntie would tell us that it was useless for us to learn if we did not try to help those who had no one to teach them. The Sunday-school lessons had to be carefully prepared on the Saturday, for we were always taught that work given to the poor should be work that cost something to the giver. This principle, regarded by her as an illustration of the text, “Shall I give unto the Lord my God that which has cost me nothing?” ran through all her precept and her practice. When in some public distress we children went to her crying, and asking whether we could not help the little children who were starving, her prompt reply was: “What will you give up for them?”. And then she said that if we liked to give up the use of sugar, we might thus each save 6d. a week to give away. I doubt if a healthier lesson can be given to children than that of personal self-denial for the good of others.

Daily, when our lessons were over, we had plenty of fun; long walks and rides, rides on a lively pony, who found small children

19 An Evangelical here refers to those religious sects in Britain that emphasized salvation by personal conversion, the authority of the Scriptures, and the greater importance of preaching over ritual; fundamentalist in orientation, Evangelicals were considered Non-conformists or Dissenters, in especial contrast to members of the Church of England.

20 *The Sunday at Home*, subtitled “A Family Magazine for Sabbath Reading,” was published by the Religious Tract Society (London). Appearing weekly from 1854 through October 1894, it contained illustrated biblical passages, essays, and serialized fiction. In November 1894 it became a monthly publication, continuing in that mode through December 1940. One of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* (1837; 1851) was entitled “Sunday at Home.”

21 Robert Moffat (1795-1883) and David Livingstone (1813-73) were both Christian missionaries in Africa, though the latter is best known today as an explorer, while Mayne Reid (1818-83) wrote adventure stories for boys primarily set in North America.

most amusing, and on which the coachman taught us to stick firmly, whatever his eccentricities of the moment; delightful all-day picnics in the lovely country round Charmouth, Auntie our merriest playfellow. Never was a healthier home, physically and mentally, made for young things than in that quiet village. And then the delight of the holidays! The pride of my mother at the good report of her darling's progress, and the renewal of acquaintance with every nook and corner in the dear old house and garden.

III.

The strong and intense Evangelicalism of Miss Marryat colored the whole of my early religious thought. I was naturally enthusiastic and fanciful, and was apt to throw myself strongly into the current of the emotional life around me, and hence I easily reflected the stern and narrow creed which ruled over my daily life. It was to me a matter of the most intense regret that Christians did not go about as in the "Pilgrim's Progress", armed to do battle with Apollyon and Giant Despair, or fight through a whole long day against thronging foes, until night brought victory and release.¹ It would have been so easy, I used to think, to do tangible battle of that sort, so much easier than to learn lessons, and keep one's temper, and mend one's stockings. Quick to learn, my lessons of Bible and Prayer Book gave me no trouble, and I repeated page after page with little labor and much credit. I remember being praised for my love of the Bible, because I had learned by heart all the epistle of St. James's, while, as a matter of fact, the desire to distinguish myself was a far more impelling motive than any love of "the holy book;"² the dignified cadences pleased my ear, and were swiftly caught and reproduced, and I was proud of the easy fashion in which I mastered and recited

1 *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), written by John Bunyan (1628-88), features as its protagonist the heroic character of Christian, who fights such allegorical creations as the Giant Despair in his journey to the Celestial City. Apollon derives from the angel of the bottomless pit called "The Destroyer" (Revelations 9:2).

2 The Epistle, or Letter, of St. James is a book in the New Testament of moral instructions; its authorship is variously ascribed to James the Greater (brother of Jesus and one of the original disciples) and James the Less (son of Alphaeus).

page after page. Another source of “carnal pride”—little suspected, I fear, by my dear instructress—was found in the often-recurring prayer meetings. In these the children were called on to take a part, and we were bidden pray aloud; this proceeding was naturally a sore trial, and being imbued with an inordinate amount of “false pride”—the fear of appearing ridiculous, *i.e.*, with self conceit—it was a great trouble when the summons came: “Annie dear, will you speak to our Lord”. But the plunge once made, and the trembling voice steadied, enthusiasm and facility for cadenced speech always swallowed up the nervous “fear of breaking down”, and I fear me that the prevailing thought was more often that God must think I prayed very nicely, than that I was a “miserable sinner”, asking “pardon for the sake of Jesus Christ”. The sense of sin, the contrition for man’s fallen state, which are required by Evangelicalism, can never be truly felt by any child; but whenever a sensitive, dreamy, and enthusiastic child comes under strong Evangelistic influence, it is sure to manifest “signs of saving grace”. As far as I can judge now, the total effect of the Calvinistic training³ was to make me somewhat morbid, but this tendency was counteracted by the healthier tone of my mother’s thought, and the natural gay buoyancy of my nature rose swiftly whenever the pressure of the teaching that I was “a child of sin”, and could “not naturally please God”, was removed.

In the spring of 1861, Miss Marryat announced her intention of going abroad, and asked my dear mother to let me accompany her. A little nephew whom she had adopted was suffering from cataract, and she desired to place him under the care of the famous Düsseldorf oculist.⁴ Amy Marryat had been recalled home soon after the death of her mother, who had died in giving birth to the child adopted by Miss Marryat, and named at her desire after her favorite brother Frederick (Captain Marryat). Her place had been taken by a girl a few months older than myself, Emma Mann, one of the daughters of a clergyman who had married a Miss Stanley, closely related, indeed if I remember

3 Calvinism constitutes the religious belief system inaugurated by the Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509-64), emphasizing the sovereignty of God in bestowing grace and especially endorsing the notion of limited election, or predestination.

4 The famous oculist is possibly the same one consulted *c.* 1860 by British artist and novelist George Du Maurier (1834-96).

rightly, a sister of the Miss Mary Stanley⁵ who did such noble work in nursing in the Crimea.

For some months we had been diligently studying German, for Miss Marryat thought it wise that we should know a language, fairly well before we visited the country of which it was the native tongue. We had been trained also to talk French daily during dinner, so we were not quite “helpless foreigners” when we steamed away from St. Catherine’s docks, and found ourselves on the following day in Antwerp, amid what seemed to us a very Babel of conflicting tongues. Alas for our carefully spoken French, articulated laboriously. We were lost in that swirl of disputing luggage-porters, and could not understand a word! But Miss Marryat was quite equal to the occasion, being by no means new to travelling, and her French stood the test triumphantly, and steered us safely to a hotel. On the morrow we started again through Aix-la-Chapelle to Bonn, the town which lies on the borders of the exquisite scenery of which the Siebengebirge and Rolandseck serve as the magic portal. Our experiences in Bonn were not wholly satisfactory. Dear Auntie was a maiden lady, looking on all young men as wolves to be kept far from her growing lambs. Bonn was a university town, and there was a mania just then prevailing there for all things English. Emma was a plump, rosy, fair-haired typical English maiden, full of frolic and harmless fun; I a very slight, pale, black-haired girl, alternating between wild fun and extreme pensiveness. In the boarding-house to which we went at first—the “Château du Rhin”, a beautiful place overhanging the broad blue Rhine—there chanced to be staying the two sons of the late Duke of Hamilton, the Marquis of Douglas and Lord Charles, with their tutor. They had the whole drawing-room floor: we a sitting-room on the ground floor and bedrooms above. The lads discovered that Miss Marryat did not like her “children” to be on speaking terms with any of the “male sect”. Here was a fine source of amusement. They would make their horses caracole⁶ on

5 Mary Stanley (1813-79), also sister of Dean Stanley (see note II.4), recruited the first party of nurses (including a contingent of nuns provided by Cardinal Manning) to the Crimea. Accompanied by both a physician and an MP, they encountered harsh accommodations and insufficient supplies. Stanley and Florence Nightingale (1820-1910) were mutually critical of each other—Nightingale finding Stanley and her company lacking professional discipline, Stanley and others seeing Nightingale as power-hungry and self-promoting. See Stanley’s *Hospitals and Sisterhoods* (1854) for her greater concern for spiritual over medical conditions.

6 To caracole one’s horse is to execute a half turn to the right or the left, in effect creating a prancing or wheeling movement.

the gravel in front of our window; they would be just starting for their ride as we went for walk or drive, and would salute us with doffed hat and low bow; they would waylay us on our way downstairs with demure “Good morning”; they would go to church and post themselves so that they could survey our pew, and Lord Charles—who possessed the power of moving at will the whole skin of the scalp—would wriggle his hair up and down till we were choking with laughter, to our own imminent risk. After a month of this, Auntie was literally driven out of the pretty *Château*, and took refuge in a girls’ school, much to our disgust, but still she was not allowed to be at rest. Mischievous students would pursue us wherever we went; sentimental Germans, with gashed cheeks,⁷ would whisper complimentary phrases as we passed; mere boyish nonsense of most harmless kind, but the rather stern English lady thought it “not proper”, and after three months of Bonn we were sent home for the holidays, somewhat in disgrace. But we had some lovely excursions during those months; such clambering up mountains, such rows on the swift-flowing Rhine, such wanderings in exquisite valleys. I have a long picture-gallery to retire into when I want to think of something fair, in recalling the moon as it silvered the Rhine at the foot of Drachenfels, or the soft mist-veiled island where dwelt the lady who is consecrated for ever by Roland’s love.⁸

A couple of months later we rejoined Miss Marryat in Paris, where we spent seven happy workful months. On Wednesdays and Saturdays we were free from lessons, and many a long afternoon was passed in the galleries of the Louvre, till we became familiar with the masterpieces of art gathered there from all lands. I doubt if there was a beautiful church in Paris that we did not visit during those weekly wanderings; that of St. Germain de l’Auxerrois was my favorite—the church whose bell gave the signal for the massacre of St. Bartholomew—for it contained such marvellous stained glass, deepest purest glory of color that I had ever seen. The solemn beauty of Notre Dame, the somewhat gaudy magnificence of La Sainte Chapelle, the stateliness of La Madeleine, the impres-

7 The young German students had gashed cheeks as marks of their practice of dueling with swords; dueling was outlawed in Britain at this time.

8 Annie’s own fount of image-making draws upon the legend of Roland, whose betrothed withdrew to a convent on the isle of Nonnenwerth upon falsely learning of his death in battle; when he returned, victorious but now bereft, he built the Rolandseck Tower opposite the Drachenfels on the Rhine, overlooking the nunnery.

sive gloom of St. Roch, were all familiar to us. Other delights were found in mingling with the bright crowds which passed along the Champs Elysées and sauntered in the Bois de Boulogne, in strolling in the garden of the Tuileries, in climbing to the top of every monument whence view of Paris could be gained. The Empire was then in its heyday of glitter, and we much enjoyed seeing the brilliant escort of the imperial carriage, with plumes and gold and silver dancing and glistening in the sunlight, while in the carriage sat the exquisitely lovely empress, with the little boy beside her, touching his cap shyly, but with something of her own grace, in answer to a greeting—the boy who was thought to be born to an imperial crown, but whose brief career was to find an ending from the spears of savages in a quarrel in which he had no concern.⁹

In the spring of 1862 it chanced that the Bishop of Ohio visited Paris, and Mr. Forbes, then English chaplain at the Church of the Rue d'Aguesseau, arranged to have a confirmation. As said above, I was under deep "religious impressions", and, in fact, with the exception of that little aberration in Germany, I was decidedly a pious girl. I looked on theatres (never having been to one) as traps set by Satan for the destruction of foolish souls; I was quite determined never to go to a ball, and was prepared to "suffer for conscience sake"—little prig that I was—if I was desired to go to one. I was consequently quite prepared to take upon myself the vows made in my name at my baptism, and to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil, with a heartiness and sincerity only equalled by my profound ignorance of the things I so readily resigned. That confirmation was to me a very solemn matter; the careful preparation, the prolonged prayers, the wondering awe as to the "sevenfold gifts of the Spirit", which were to be given by "the laying on of hands", all tended to excitement.¹⁰ I could scarcely control

9 Napoleon III presided over the Second Empire of France from 1852 to 1870; the Empress Eugenie (1826-1920) was mother to their son, Napoleon-Eugene-Louis Bonaparte, who died in the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879.

10 The "seven-fold gift of the spirit," taken from the Book of Isaiah, consists of Wisdom, Understanding, Counsel, Fortitude, Knowledge, Piety, and Fear of the Lord; it is traditionally represented in art by seven doves. In the nineteenth century, confirmation, or receiving the Holy Spirit, developed into the two-stage approach of baptism and the laying-on of hands, as authorized by Acts 8. In Christianity, confirmation denotes a rite supplemental to baptism and held by some churches to be a sacrament; it can generally be described as an occasion for confirming one's religious faith.

myself as I knelt at the altar rails, and felt as though the gentle touch of the aged Bishop, which fluttered for an instant on my bowed head, were the very touch of the wing of that “Holy Spirit, heavenly Dove”, whose presence had been so earnestly invoked. Is there anything easier, I wonder, than to make a young and sensitive girl “intensely religious”.

My mother came over for the confirmation and for the “first communion”¹¹ on Easter Sunday, and we had a delightful fortnight together, returning home after we had wandered hand-in-hand over all my favorite haunts. The summer of 1862 was spent with Miss Marryat at Sidmouth, and, wise woman that she was, she now carefully directed our studies with a view to our coming enfranchisement from the “school-room”. More and more were we trained to work alone; our leading-strings were slackened, so that we never felt them save when we blundered; and I remember that when I once complained, in loving fashion, that she was “teaching me so little”, she told me that I was getting old enough to be trusted to work by myself, and that I must not expect to “have Auntie for a crutch all through life”. And I venture to say that this gentle withdrawal of constant supervision and teaching was one of the wisest and kindest things that this noble-hearted woman ever did for us. It is the usual custom to keep girls in the school-room until they “come out”;¹² then, suddenly, they are left to their own devices, and, bewildered by their unaccustomed freedom, they waste time that might be priceless for their intellectual growth. Lately, the opening of universities to women has removed this danger for the more ambitious; but at the time of which I am writing no one dreamed of the changes soon to be made in the direction of the “higher education of women”.¹³

11 After confirmation, one is entitled to take “first communion,” a celebration of the Eucharist or the Lord’s Supper, which is performed as part of a service in which bread and wine are consecrated and consumed as symbolic of the flesh and blood of Christ, conjoining him spiritually with the communicant.

12 A young woman would “come out” around the age of eighteen, a turning point usually signalled by the occasion of a particular dance or ball, after which she was considered to be ready for courtship and marriage.

13 By the recent access of higher education to women Annie is making reference to a series of events, namely, the 1869 founding of the first women’s university college (Hitchin, later Girton, at Cambridge), the 1875 law allowing universities to grant women degrees, and the 1878 opening of degrees to women by London University (although not by any others).

During the winter of 1862-1863 Miss Marryat was in London, and for a few months I remained there with her, attending the admirable French classes of M. Roche. In the spring I returned home to Harrow, going up each week to the classes; and when these were over, Auntie told me that she thought all she could usefully do was done, and that it was time that I should try my wings alone. So well, however, had she succeeded in her aims, that my emancipation from the school-room was but the starting-point of more eager study, though now the study turned into the lines of thought towards which my personal tendencies most attracted me. German I continued to read with a master, and music, under the marvelously able teaching of Mr. John Farmer, musical director of Harrow School, took up much of my time. My dear mother had a passion for music, and Beethoven and Bach were her favorite composers. There was scarcely a sonata of Beethoven's that I did not learn, scarcely a fugue of Bach's that I did not master. Mendelssohn's "Lieder" gave a lighter recreation, and many a happy evening did we spend, my mother and I, over the stately strains of the blind Titan, and the sweet melodies of the German wordless orator.¹⁴ Musical "At Homes",¹⁵ too, were favorite amusements at Harrow, and at these my facile fingers made me a welcome guest.

A very pleasant place was Harrow to a light-hearted serious-brained girl. The picked¹⁶ men of the Schools of Oxford and Cambridge came there as junior masters, so that one's partners at ball and croquet and archery could talk as well as flirt. Never girl had, I venture to say, a brighter girlhood than mine. Every morning and much of the afternoon spent in eager earnest study: evenings in merry party or quiet home-life, one as delightful as the other. Archery and croquet had in me a most devoted disciple, and the "pumps and vanities" of the ballroom found the happiest of votaries. My darling mother certainly "spoiled" me, so far as were concerned all the small roughnesses of life. She never allowed a trouble of any kind to touch me, and cared only that all worries should fall on her, all joys on me. I know now what I never dreamed then, that her life was one of serious anxiety. The heavy burden of my brother's school and college-life pressed on her constantly, and

14 The German composer Jakob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn (1809-47) published his *Lieder ohne Worte* (Songs without Words) in London in 1832; the "blind Titan" refers to Milton.

15 Musical "At Homes" were informal evening gatherings in someone's home during which amateur participants performed musical pieces, often singing to the accompaniment of the piano or the piano forte.

16 "Picked" here means best or most suitable for the purpose.

her need of money was often serious. A lawyer whom she trusted absolutely cheated her systematically, using for his own purposes the remittances she made for payment of liabilities, thus keeping upon her a constant drain. Yet for me all that was wanted was ever there. Was it a ball to which we were going? I need never think of what I would wear till the time for dressing arrived, and there laid out ready for me was all I wanted, every detail complete from top to toe. No hand but hers must dress my hair, which, loosed, fell in dense curly masses nearly to my knees; no hand but hers must fasten dress and deck with flowers, and if I sometimes would coaxingly ask if I might not help by sewing in laces, or by doing some trifle in aid, she would kiss me and bid me run to my books or my play, telling me that her only pleasure in life was caring for her "treasure". Alas! how lightly we take the self-denying labor that makes life so easy, ere yet we have known what life means when the protecting mother-wing is withdrawn. So guarded and shielded had been my childhood and youth from every touch of pain and anxiety that love could bear for me, that I never dreamed that life might be a heavy burden, save as I saw it in the poor I was sent to help; all the joy of those happy years I took, not ungratefully I hope, but certainly with as glad unconsciousness of anything rare in it as I took the sunlight. Passionate love, indeed, I gave to my darling, but I never knew all I owed her till I passed out of her tender guardianship, till I left my mother's home. Is such training wise? I am not sure. It makes the ordinary roughnesses of life come with so stunning a shock, when one goes out into the world, that one is apt to question whether some earlier initiation into life's sterner mysteries would not be wiser for the young. Yet it is a fair thing to have that joyous youth to look back upon, and at least it is a treasury of memory that no thief can steal in the struggles of later life.

During those happy years my brain was given plenty of exercise. I used to keep a list of the books I read, so that I might not neglect my work; and finding a "Library of the Fathers"¹⁷ on the shelves, I selected that for one *pièce de résistance*. Soon those strange mystic writers won over me a great fascination, and I threw myself ardently into a study of the question: "Where is now the Catholic Church?" I read Pusey, and Liddon, and Keble, with many another of that school, and many of the seventeenth

17 This "Library of the Fathers," edited by John Henry Parker, was a collection of writings of the early Christian mystics, who were generally accepted as witnesses to or expositors of the original teachings of the Primitive Christian Church (see note XIII.1). For Annie's continued interest in this subject, see her post-Theosophy book *Esoteric Christianity* (1901).

century English divines.¹⁸ I began to fast—to the intense disapproval of my mother, who cared for my health far more than for all the Fathers the Church could boast of—to use the sign of the cross, to go to weekly communion. Indeed, the contrast I found between my early Evangelical training, and the doctrines of the Primitive Christian Church would have driven me over to Rome, had it not been for the proofs afforded by Pusey and his co-workers, that the English Church might be Catholic although non-Roman. But for them I should most certainly have joined the Papal Communion;¹⁹ for if the Church of the early centuries be compared with Rome and with Geneva, there is no doubt that Rome shows marks of primitive Christianity of which Geneva is entirely devoid. I became content when I found that the practices and doctrines of the Anglican Church²⁰ could be knitted on to those of the martyrs and confessors of the early Church, for it had not yet struck me that the early Church might itself be challenged. To me, at that time, the authority of Jesus was supreme and unassailable; his apostles were his infallible messengers; Clement of Rome, Polycarp, and Barnabas, these were the very pupils of the apostles themselves.²¹ I never dreamed of forgeries,

18 Henry Parry Liddon (1829-90) was canon of St. Paul's; he wrote and delivered his celebrated Bampton lectures "On the Divinity of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (1866). The Rev. John Keble (1792-1866), theologian and poet, was considered by John Henry Newman to be the "true and primary author" of the Oxford Movement; Keble College at Oxford was founded in 1869 in his memory. The seventeenth-century divines to whom she refers are probably those who distanced themselves from continental Protestantism and who considered the Church of England as the Catholic Church in England.

19 Papal Communion here stands for the Roman Catholic Church; Geneva was the center of Reformed Protestantism under Calvin in the sixteenth century, and hence exemplifies Protestant dogmatic theology.

20 The Anglican Church is the established Church of England, founded by Henry VIII, as opposed to the Christianity of Roman Catholicism and the Non-conformist sects (Methodists, Baptists, Evangelicals, etc.); in the United States, it is most closely akin to the Episcopal Church.

21 The apostles (the name means "to send forth") of Jesus were his twelve disciples (Peter, Andrew, James the Greater, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James the Less, Jude, Simon, and Matthias); Pope Clement I (Clemens Romanus) was fourth in line to St. Peter and the first of the "Apostolic Fathers"; the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp (AD 69-155) was said to extend the sub-Apostolic age; Saint Barnabas (originally Joseph) was considered an apostle in Holy Scripture and hence ranked with the original twelve.

of pious frauds, of writings falsely ascribed to venerated names. Nor do I now regret that so it was; for, without belief, the study of the early Fathers would be an intolerable weariness; and that old reading of mine has served me well in many of my later controversies with Christians, who knew the literature of their Church less well than I.

To this ecclesiastical reading was added some study of stray scientific works, but the number of these that came in my way was very limited. The atmosphere surrounding me was literary rather than scientific. I remember reading a translation of Plato that gave me great delight, and being rather annoyed by the insatiable questionings of Socrates. Lord Derby's translation of the *Iliad* also charmed me with its stateliness and melody, and Dante was another favorite study. Wordsworth and Cowper I much disliked, and into the same category went all the 17th and 18th century "Poets," though I read them conscientiously through. Southey fascinated me with his wealth of Oriental fancies, while Spencer was a favorite book, put beside Milton and Dante. My novel reading was extremely limited; indeed the "three volume novel"²² was a forbidden fruit. My mother regarded these ordinary love-stories as unhealthy reading for a young girl, and gave me Scott and Kingsley, but not Miss Braddon or Mrs. Henry Wood. Nor would she take me to the theatre, though we went to really good concerts. She had a horror of sentimentality in girls, and loved to see them bright and gay, and above all things absolutely ignorant of all evil things and of premature love-dreams. Happy, healthy and workful were those too brief years.

IV.

My grandfather's house, No. 8, Albert Square, Clapham Road, was a second home from my earliest childhood.

That house, with its little strip of garden at the back, will always remain dear and sacred to me. I can see now the two

22 The "three volume novel," also known as the "triple decker," was the typical mode of publishing fiction during most of the nineteenth century, its length and format dictated in large part by the circulating libraries; Annie's mother is here favoring well-established or conventional writers like Sir Walter Scott and Charles Kingsley over the more popular sensation novelists like Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Mrs. Henry Wood (no family connection).

almond trees, so rich in blossom every spring, so barren in fruit every autumn; the large spreading tufts of true Irish shamrock, brought from Ireland, and lovingly planted in the new grey London house, amid the smoke; the little nooks at the far end, wherein I would sit cosily out of sight reading a favorite book. Inside it was but a commonplace London house, only one room, perhaps, differing from any one that might have been found in any other house in the square. That was my grandfather's "work-room", where he had a lathe fitted up, for he had a passion and a genius for inventive work in machinery. He took out patents for all sorts of ingenious contrivances, but always lost money. His favorite invention was of a "railway chair",¹ for joining the ends of rails together, and in the ultimate success of this he believed to his death. It was (and is) used on several lines, and was found to answer splendidly, but the old man never derived any profit from his invention. The fact was he had no money, and those who had took it up and utilised it, and kept all the profit for themselves. There were several cases in which his patents dropped, and then others took up his inventions, and made a commercial success thereof.

A strange man altogether was that grandfather of mine, whom I can only remember as a grand-looking old man, with snow-white hair and piercing hawk's eyes. The merriest of wild Irishmen was he in his youth, and I have often wished that his biography had been written, if only as a picture of Dublin society at the time. He had an exquisite voice, and one night he and some of his wild comrades went out singing through the streets as beggars. Pennies, sixpences, shillings, and even half-crowns came showering down in recompense of street music of such unusual excellence; then the young scamps, ashamed of their gains, poured them all into the hat of a cripple they met, who must have thought that all the blessed saints were out that night in the Irish capital. On another occasion he went to the wake of an old woman who had been bent nearly double by rheumatism, and had been duly "laid out", and tied down firmly, so as to keep the body straight in the recumbent position. He hid under the bed, and when the whisky was flowing freely, and the orgie was at its height, he cut the ropes with a sharp knife, and the old woman

1 A railway chair is the support or carriage of a railroad rail, specifically an iron or steel block or plate that acts as a socket or clutch that in turn supports a rail or secures it to a sleeper or tie.

suddenly sat up in bed, frightening the revellers out of their wits, and luckily for my grandfather, out of the room. Many such tales would he tell, with quaint Irish humor, in his later days. He died, from a third stroke of paralysis, in 1862.

The Morrisises were a very “clannish” family, and my grandfather’s house was the London centre. All the family gathered there on each Christmastide,² and on Christmas day was always held high festival. For long my brother and I were the only grandchildren within reach, and were naturally made much of. The two sons were out in India, married, with young families. The youngest daughter was much away from home, and a second was living in Constantinople, but three others lived with their father and mother. Bessie, the eldest of the whole family, was a woman of rigid honor and conscientiousness, but poverty and the struggle to keep out of debt had soured her, and “Aunt Bessie” was an object of dread, not of love. One story of her early life will best tell her character. She was engaged to a young clergyman, and one day when Bessie was at church he preached a sermon taken without acknowledgment from some old divine. The girl’s keen sense of honor was shocked at the deception, and she broke off her engagement, but remained unmarried for the rest of her life. “Careful and troubled about many things” was poor Aunt Bessie, and I remember being rather shocked one day at hearing her express her sympathy with Martha, when her sister left her to serve alone, and at her saying: “I doubt very much whether Jesus would have liked it if Martha had been lying about on the floor as well as Mary, and there had been no supper. But there! it’s always those who do the work who are scolded, because they have not time to be as sweet and nice as those who do nothing.” Nor could she ever approve of the treatment of the laborers in the parable, when those who “had borne the burden and heat of the day” received but the same wage as those that had worked but one hour. “It was not just”, she would say doggedly. A sad life was hers, for she repelled all sympathy, and yet later I had reason to believe that she half broke her heart because none loved her well. She was ever gloomy, unsympathising, carping, but she worked herself to death for those whose love she chillily repulsed. She worked till, denying herself every comfort, she literally dropped.

2 Christmastide is the festival season from Christmas Eve until after New Year’s Day; in Britain it usually lasts until the Epiphany (January 6, also known as Twelfth Night), commemorating the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles.

One morning, when she got out of bed, she fell, and crawling into bed again, quietly said she could do no more; lay there for some months, suffering horribly with unvarying patience; and died, rejoicing that at last she would have "rest".

Two other "Aunties" were my playfellows, and I their pet. Minnie, a brilliant pianiste, earned a precarious livelihood by teaching music. The long fasts, the facing of all weathers, the weary rides in omnibuses with soaked feet, broke down at last a splendid constitution, and after some three years of torture, commencing with a sharp attack of English cholera, she died the year before my marriage. But during my girlhood she was the gayest and merriest of my friends, her natural buoyancy re-asserting itself whenever she could escape from her musical treadmill. Great was my delight when she joined my mother and myself for our spring or summer trips, and when at my favorite St. Leonards—at the far unfashionable end, right away from the gay watering-place folk—we settled down for four or five happy weeks of sea and country, and when Minnie and I scampered over the country on horseback, merry as children set free from school. My other favorite auntie was of a quieter type, a soft pretty loving little woman. "Co" we called her, for she was "such a cosy little thing", her father used to say. She was my mother's favorite sister, her "child", she would name her, because "Co" was so much her junior, and when she was a young girl the little child had been her charge. "Always take care of little Co", was one of my mother's dying charges to me, and fortunately "little Co" has—though the only one of my relatives who has done so—clung to me through change of faith, and through social ostracism. Her love for me, and her full belief that, however she differed from me, I meant right, have never varied, have never been shaken. She is intensely religious—as will be seen in the later story, wherein her life was much woven with mine—but however much "darling Annie's" views or actions might shock her, it is "darling Annie" through it all; "You are so good" she said to me the last time I saw her, looking up at me with all her heart in her eyes; "anyone so good as you must come to our dear Lord at last!" As though any, save a brute, could be aught but good to "little Co".

On the Christmas following my eighteenth birthday, a little Mission Church in which Minnie was much interested, was opened near Albert Square. My High Church enthusiasm was in full bloom, and the services in this little Mission Church were "high", whereas those in all the neighboring churches were

“low”.³ A Mr. Hoare, an intensely earnest man, was working there in most devoted fashion, and was glad to welcome any aid; we decorated his church, worked ornaments for it, and thought we were serving God when we were really amusing ourselves in a small place where our help was over-estimated, and where the clergy, very likely unconsciously, flattered us for our devotion. Among those who helped to carry on the services there, was a young undermaster of Stockwell Grammar School, the Rev. Frank Besant, a Cambridge man, who had passed as 28th wrangler in his year, and who had just taken orders.⁴ At Easter we were again at Albert Square, and devoted much time to the little church, decking it on Easter Eve with soft yellow tufts of primrose blossom and taking much delight in the unbounded admiration bestowed on the dainty spring blossoms by the poor who crowded in. I made a lovely white cross for the super-altar with camelias and azaleas and white geraniums, but after all it was not really as spring-like, as suitable for a “Resurrection”, as the simple sweet wild flowers, still dewy from their nests in field and glade and lane.

That Easter was memorable to me for another cause. It saw waked and smothered my first doubt. That some people did doubt the historical accuracy of the Bible I knew, for one or two of the Harrow masters were friends of Colenso, the heretic Bishop of Natal, but fresh from my Patristic studies,⁵ I looked on heretics with blind horror, possibly the stronger from its very vagueness, and its ignorance of what it feared. My mother objected to my reading controversial books which dealt with the points at issue between Christianity and Freethought,⁶ and I did not care for her favorite Stanley, who might have widened my views, regarding him (on the word of Pusey) as “unsound in the

3 High Church views within the Church of England favored a liturgical, Anglo-Catholic orientation, while at the opposite end of the spectrum Low Church views were informed by the more personalized beliefs and practices employed by the Protestantism of Methodists and Congregationalists.

4 This is the first mention of Annie’s future husband, the Rev. Frank Besant (1840-1917). A wrangler is an undergraduate who obtains first class honors in the mathematical final examination at a university.

5 Patristic studies are of or related to the early fathers of the Christian Church.

6 Freethought refers to freethinking or unorthodox thought, especially in religious matters, based on independent reasoning apart from authority; it is usually marked by skepticism or denial of established belief systems.

faith once delivered to the saints". I had read Pusey's book on "Daniel the prophet", and, knowing nothing of the criticisms he attacked, I felt triumphant at his convincing demonstrations of their error, and felt sure that none but the wilfully blind could fail to see how weak were the arguments of the heretic writers. That stately preface of his was one of my favorite pieces of reading, and his dignified defence against all novelties of "that which must be old because it is eternal, and must be unchangeable because it is true", at once charmed and satisfied me. The delightful vagueness of Stanley, which just suited my mother's broad views, because it *was* vague and beautiful, was denounced by Pusey—not unwarrantably—as that "variegated use of words which destroys all definiteness of meaning". When she would bid me not be uncharitable to those with whom I differed in matters of religion, I would answer in his words, that "charity to error is treason to truth", and that to speak out the truth unwaveringly as it was revealed, was alone "loyalty to God and charity to the souls of men".

Judge, then, of my terror at my own results when I found myself betrayed into writing down some contradictions from the Bible. With that poetic dreaming which is one of the charms of Catholicism, whether English or Roman, I threw myself back into the time of the first century as the "Holy Week"⁷ of 1866 approached. In order to facilitate the realisation of those last sacred days of God incarnate on earth, working out man's salvation, I resolved to write a brief history of that week, compiled from the four gospels, meaning then to try and realise each day the occurrences that had happened on the corresponding date in A.D. 33, and so to follow those blessed feet" step by step, till they were

"... nailed for our advantage to the bitter cross."⁸

With the fearlessness which springs from ignorance I sat down to my task. My method was as follows:

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- 7 Holy Week is the week before Easter during which Christians commemorate the passion of Christ, i.e., his suffering on the cross; it begins with Palm Sunday, which marks his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and ends with Easter Sunday, which acknowledges his resurrection.
 - 8 The four gospels are the first four books of the New Testament, namely Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The quotation is from William Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I* (I.ii.24-27): "In those holy fields/Over whose acres walked those blessed feet/Which fourteen hundred years ago were nail'd/For our advantage on the bitter cross."

MATTHEW.

PALM SUNDAY.

Rode into Jerusalem.
Purified the Temple.
Returned to Bethany.

MONDAY.

Cursed the fig tree. Taught in the Temple, and spake many parables. No breaks shown, but the fig tree (xxi., 19) did not wither till Tuesday (see Mark).

TUESDAY.

All chaps. xxi., 20, xxii.-xxv., spoken on Tuesday, for xxvi., 2 gives Passover⁹ as "After only two days".

WEDNESDAY.

Blank.

THURSDAY.

Preparation of Passover. Eating of Passover, and the institution of the Holy Eucharist. Gethsemane. Betrayal by Judas. Led captive to Caiaphas.¹⁰
Denied by St. Peter.

FRIDAY.

Led to Pilate.¹² Judas hangs himself. Tried. Condemned to death. Scourged and mocked. Led to crucifixion. Darkness from 12 to 3. Died at 3.

MARK.

PALM SUNDAY.

Rode into Jerusalem.
Returned to Bethany.

MONDAY.

Cursed the fig tree.
Purified the Temple.
Went out of the city.

TUESDAY.

Saw fig tree withered up.
Then discourses.

WEDNESDAY.

(Possibly remained in Bethany; ...

THURSDAY.

Same as Matt.

FRIDAY.

As Matthew, but hour of crucifixion given, 9 a.m.

9 Passover commemorates the freeing of the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 12:23-27); it is celebrated as an annual spring festival.

10 For Holy Eucharist, see note III.11. Gethsemane is the garden on the Mount of Olives to the east of Jerusalem where Jesus prayed on the night of his arrest before his crucifixion. Judas Iscariot, one of the twelve disciples, betrayed Jesus by disclosing his location at Gethsemane to the chief priests and elders in exchange for thirty pieces of silver; he identified him with a kiss. Caiaphas, appointed high priest of the Jews by the Roman procurator, took a leading part in the trial of Jesus at the nocturnal meeting held immediately after the private examination by Annas.

LUKE.

PALM SUNDAY.

Rode into Jerusalem.
Purified the Temple.
Note: "Taught daily in the Temple".

MONDAY.

Like Matthew.

TUESDAY.

Discourses. No date shown.

WEDNESDAY.

...*the alabaster box of ointment.*)

THURSDAY.

Same as Matt.

FRIDAY.

Led to Pilate. Sent to Herod.¹³
Sent back to Pilate. Rest as in Matthew; but *one* malefactor repents.

JOHN.

PALM SUNDAY.

Rode into Jerusalem.
Spoke in the Temple.

MONDAY.

TUESDAY.

WEDNESDAY.

THURSDAY.

Discourses with disciples, but *before* the Passover. Washes the disciples' feet. Nothing said of Holy Eucharist, nor of agony in Gethsemane. Malchus' ear.¹¹ Led captive to Annas first. Then to Caiaphas. Denied by St. Peter.

FRIDAY.

Taken to Pilate. Jews would not enter, that they might eat the Passover. Scourged by Pilate before condemnation, and mocked. Shown by Pilate to Jews at 12.

11 Malchus, personal servant to Caiaphas, was the man whose right ear was cut off by Peter when Jesus was arrested. Annas was the high priest in Jerusalem who conducted the first informal inquiry of Jesus prior to his more formal trial.

12 Pontius Pilate, Roman procurator of Judaea under the Emperor Tiberius, presided over the final trial of Jesus and ordered his death by crucifixion.

13 Herod Antipas, son of Herod I the Great and ruler (tetrarch) in Galilee, refused to pass judgment on Jesus and returned him to Pilate.

At this point I broke down. I had been getting more and more uneasy and distressed as I went on, but when I found that the Jews would not go into the judgment hall lest they should be defiled, because they desired to eat the passover, having previously seen that Jesus had actually eaten the passover with his disciples the evening before; when after writing down that he was crucified at 9 a.m. and that there was darkness over all the land from 12 to 3 p.m., I found that three hours after he was crucified he was standing in the judgment hall, and that at the very hour at which the miraculous darkness covered the earth; when I saw that I was writing a discord instead of a harmony, I threw down my pen and shut up my Bible. The shock of doubt was, however, only momentary. I quickly recognised it as a temptation of the devil, and I shrank back horror-stricken and penitent for the momentary lapse of faith. I saw that these apparent contradictions were really a test of faith, and that there would be no credit in which there were no difficulties. *Credo quia impossibile*;¹⁴ I repeated Tertullian's words at first doggedly, at last triumphantly. I fasted as penance for my involuntary sin of unbelief. I remembered that the Bible must not be carelessly read, and that St. Peter had warned us that there were in it "some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest unto their own destruction". I shuddered at the "destruction" to the edge of which my unlucky "harmony" had drawn me, and resolved that I would never again venture on a task for which I was so evidently unfitted. Thus the first doubt was caused, and though swiftly trampled down, it had none the less raised its head. It was stifled, not answered, for all my religious training had led me to regard a doubt as a sin to be repented of, not examined. And it left in my mind the dangerous feeling that there were some things into which it was safer not to enquire too closely; things which must be accepted on faith, and not too narrowly scrutinised. The awful threat: "He that believeth not shall be

14 The Latin phrase, *Credo quia impossibile*, suspected as a misquotation, translates as "I believe it because it is impossible"; in this form, it is cited as either a sign of irrationality or an indication of blind faith. It is more likely that Tertullian wrote *Certum est, quia impossibile est*, meaning "I am resolved because it is impossible" (*De carne Christi*, ch. 5:4). Tertullian (d. 220 in Carthage) was an important early Christian theologian; as the initiator of ecclesiastical Latin, he was influential in shaping the language and thought of Western Christianity.

damned,” sounded in my ears, and, like the angel with the flaming sword, barred the path of all too curious enquiry.¹⁵

V.

The spring ripened into summer in uneventful fashion, so far as I was concerned, the smooth current of my life flowing on untroubled, hard reading and merry play filling the happy days. I learned later that two or three offers of marriage reached my mother for me; but she answered to each: “She is too young. I will not have her troubled.” Of love-dreams I had absolutely none, partly, I expect, from the absence of fiery novels from my reading, partly because my whole dream-tendencies were absorbed by religion, and all my fancies ran towards a “religious life”. I longed to spend my time in worshipping Jesus, and was, as far as my inner life was concerned, absorbed in that passionate love of “the Savior” which, among emotional Catholics, really is the human passion of love transferred to an ideal—for women to Jesus, for men to the Virgin Mary. In order to show that I am not here exaggerating, I subjoin a few of the prayers in which I found daily delight, and I do this in order to show how an emotional girl may be attracted by these so-called devotional exercises.¹

“O crucified Love, raise in me fresh ardors of love and consolation, that it may henceforth be the greatest torment I can endure ever to offend Thee; that it may be my greatest delight to please Thee.”

“Let the remembrance of Thy death, O Lord Jesu, make me to desire and pant after Thee, that I may delight in Thy gracious presence.”

“O most sweet Jesu Christ, I, unworthy sinner, yet redeemed

15 After God banished Adam and Eve for their disobedience, he positioned an angel with a flaming sword at the entrance to the Garden of Eden to keep them from returning (Genesis).

1 Such prayers were commonly found in books of daily devotional exercises, such as Richard Allestree’s *The Whole Duty of Man* (new ed. 1824), which announces on its title page that it provides “private devotions for several occasions.” More specifically, the fourth quotation comes from Charles Wesley’s translation of the works of Eupolis (446-411 BCE), while the sixth is a citation from the “Prayer of Thanksgiving” by the Franciscan friar St. Bonaventure (1221-74).

by Thy precious blood.... Thine I am and will be, in life and in death."

"O Jesu, beloved, fairer than the sons of men, draw me after Thee with the cords of Thy love."

"Blessed are Thou, O most merciful God, who didst vouchsafe to espouse me to the heavenly Bridegroom in the waters of baptism, and hast imparted Thy body and blood as a new gift of espousal and the meet consummation of Thy love."

"O most sweet Lord Jesu, transfix the affections of my inmost soul with that most joyous and most healthful wound of Thy love, with true, serene, most holy, apostolic charity; that my soul may ever languish and melt with entire love and longing for Thee. Let it desire Thee and faint for Thy courts; long to be dissolved and be with Thee."

"Oh, that I could embrace Thee with that most burning love of angels."

"Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth; for Thy love is better than wine. Draw me, we will run after Thee. The king hath brought me into his chambers.... Let my soul, O Lord, feel the sweetness of Thy presence. May it taste how sweet Thou art.... May the sweet and burning power of Thy love, I beseech Thee, absorb my soul."

To my dear mother this type of religious thought was revolting. But then, she was a woman who had been a wife and a devoted one, while I was a child awaking into womanhood, with emotions and passions dawning and not understood, emotions and passions which craved satisfaction, and found it in this "Ideal Man". Thousands of girls in England are to-day in exactly this mental phase, and it is a phase full of danger. In America it is avoided by a frank, open, unsentimental companionship between boys and girls, between young men and young women. In England, where this wisely free comradeship is regarded as "improper", the perfectly harmless and natural sexual feeling is either dwarfed or forced, and so we have "prudishness" and "fastness". The sweeter and more loving natures become prudes; the more shallow as well as the more high-spirited and merry natures become flirts. Often, as in my own case, the merry side finds its satisfaction in amusements that demand active physical exercise, while the loving side finds its joy in religious expansion, in which the idealised figure of Jesus becomes the object of passion, and the life of the nun becomes the ideal life, as being dedicated to that one devotion. To the girl, of course, this devotion is all that is most holy, most

noble, most pure. But analysing it now, after it has long been a thing of the past, I cannot but regard it as a mere natural outlet for the dawning feelings of womanhood, certain to be the more intense and earnest as the nature is deep and loving.

One very practical and mischievous result of this religious feeling is the idealisation of all clergymen, as being the special messengers of, and the special means of communication with, the "Most High". The priest is surrounded by the halo of Deity. The power that holds the keys of heaven and of hell becomes the object of reverence and of awe. Far more lofty than any title bestowed by earthly monarch is that patent of nobility straight from the hand of the "King of kings", which seems to give to the mortal something of the authority of the immortal, to crown the head of the priest with the diadem² which belongs to those who are "kings and priests unto God". Swayed by these feelings, the position of a clergyman's wife seems second only to that of the nun, and has therefore a wonderful attractiveness, an attractiveness in which the particular clergyman affected plays a very subordinate part; it is the "sacred office", the nearness to "holy things", the consecration involved, which seem to make the wife a nearer worshipper than those who do not partake in the immediate "services of the altar"³—it is all these that shed a glamor over the clerical life which attracts most those who are most apt to self-devotion, most swayed by imagination. I know how incomprehensible this will seem to many of my readers, but it is a fact none the less, and the saddest pity of it is that the glamor is most over those whose brains are quick and responsive to all forms of noble emotions, all suggestions of personal self-sacrifice; and if such later rise to the higher emotions whose shadows have attracted them, and to that higher self-sacrifice whose whispers reached them in their early youth, then the false prophet's veil is raised, and the life is either wrecked, or through storm-wind and surge of battling billows, with loss of mast and sail, is steered by firm hand into the port of a higher creed.

My mother, Minnie, and I passed the summer holidays at St. Leonards, and many a merry gallop had we over our favorite fields, I on a favorite black mare, Gipsy Queen, as full of life and spirits as I was myself, who danced gaily over ditch and hedge,

2 A diadem is a crown or ornamental headband worn to denote royalty or to serve as some other emblem conveying dignity or respect.

3 The altar in the Anglican Church, known as the Lord's Table, is the focal point for worship; the chief service performed in front of the altar by the clergy is the Holy Eucharist, or communion.

thinking little of my weight, for I rode barely eight stone.⁴ At the end of those, our last free summer holidays, we returned as usual to Harrow, and shortly afterwards I went to Switzerland with some dear friends of ours named Roberts.

Everyone about Manchester will remember Mr. Roberts, the solicitor, the “poor man’s lawyer”.⁵ Close friend of Ernest Jones,⁶ and hand-in-hand with him through all his struggles, Mr. Roberts was always ready to fight a poor man’s battle for him without fee, and to champion any worker unfairly dealt with. He worked hard in the agitation which saved women from working in the mines, and I have heard him tell how he had seen them toiling, naked to the waist, with short petticoats barely reaching to their knees, rough, foul-tongued, brutalised out of all womanly decency and grace; and how he had seen little children working there too, babies of three and four set to watch a door, and falling asleep at their work to be roused by curse and kick to the unfair toil. The old man’s eye would begin to flash and his voice to rise as he told of these horrors, and then his face would soften as he added that, after it was all over and the slavery was put an end to, as he went through a coal-district the women standing at their doors would lift up their children to see “Lawyer Roberts” go by, and would bid “God bless him” for what he had done. This dear old man was my first tutor in Radicalism,⁷ and I was an apt pupil. I had taken no interest in politics, but had unconsciously reflected more or less the decorous Whiggism⁸ which had always

4 A stone is an official British unit of weight equivalent to fourteen pounds; hence Annie weighed about 112 pounds at the age of eighteen.

5 William Prowing Roberts (1806-71) was a solicitor and trades-union advocate who practiced in Bath, Manchester, and London; he was diligent in the cause for extension of the franchise and in efforts to improve the conditions of the working classes.

6 Ernest Charles Jones (1819-69), poet (under the pen name Frederick Leary) and politician, was a dedicated proponent of the Chartist movement, which especially worked to extend the vote during the 1840s.

7 Radicalism in general refers to the will or effort to uproot and reform established laws, institutions, and methods of government without delay; in Britain in the nineteenth century, it referred to the doctrines or principles of the extreme wing of the Liberal Party.

8 Whiggism pertains to the policies and practices of the Whig Party, one of the two major British political groups of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century (the other was the royalist Tory Party); it was chiefly associated with efforts to limit royal authority and increase parliamentary power, with preference for Dissenters as opposed to members of the established Anglican Church.

surrounded me. I regarded “the poor” as folk to be educated, looked after, charitably dealt with, and always treated with most perfect courtesy, the courtesy being due from me, as a lady, to all equally, whether they were rich or poor. But to Mr. Roberts “the poor” were the working-bees, the wealth producers, with a right to self-rule, not to looking after, with a right to justice, not to charity, and he preached his doctrines to me, in season and out of season. “What do you think of John Bright?”⁹ he demanded of me one day. “I have never thought of him at all,” I answered lightly. “Isn’t he a rather rough sort of man, who goes about making rows?” “There, I thought so,” he broke out fiercely. “That’s just what they say. I believe some of you fine ladies would not go to heaven if you had to rub shoulders with John Bright, the noblest man God ever gave to the cause of the poor.” And then he launched out into stories of John Bright’s work and John Bright’s eloquence, and showed me the changes that work and eloquence had made in the daily lives of the people.

With Mr. Roberts, his wife, and two daughters, I went to Switzerland as the autumn drew near.¹⁰ It would be of little interest to tell how we went to Chamounix and worshipped Mont Blanc, how we crossed the Mer de Glace and the Mauvais Pas, how we visited the Monastery of St. Bernard (I losing my heart to the beautiful dogs), how we went by steamer down the lake of Thun, how we gazed at the Jungfrau and saw the exquisite Staubach, how we visited Lausanne, and Berne, and Geneva, how we stood beside the wounded Lion,¹¹ and shuddered in the dungeon of Chillon, how we walked distances we never should have attempted in England, how we younger ones lost ourselves on a Sunday afternoon, after ascending a mountain, and returned footsore and weary, to meet a party going out to seek us with

9 John Bright (1811–89), orator and statesman, was a Liberal MP and a staunch supporter of Charles Bradlaugh; he was a prominent representative of the emergence of the manufacturing class as a force in English politics after the Reform Act of 1832.

10 By spending the summer in Switzerland, Annie and the Roberts family were participating in a middle-class version of the Grand Tour, an extended form of travel on the Continent that was often associated with a kind of coming-of-age for the British aristocracy.

11 “The wounded lion” refers to the stone sculpture carved into a cliffside in Lucerne, Switzerland, to commemorate the 300 Swiss Guards who died protecting Louis XVI from a rioting mob during the French Revolution; it was sculpted by Danish artist Bertel Thorvaldsen in 1823.

lanterns and ropes. All these things have been so often described that I will not add one more description to the list, nor dwell on that strange feeling of awe, of wonder, of delight, that everyone must have felt, when the glory of the peaks clad in “everlasting snow” is for the first time seen against the azure sky on the horizon, and you whisper to yourself, half breathless: “The Alps! The Alps!”

During that autumn I became engaged to the Rev. Frank Besant, giving up with a sigh of regret my dreams of the “religious life”, and substituting for them the work which would have to be done as the wife of a priest,¹² laboring ever in the church and among the poor. A queer view, some people may think, for a girl to take of married life, but it was the natural result of my living the life of the Early Church, of my enthusiasm for religious work. To me a priest was a half-angelic creature, whose whole life was consecrated to heaven; all that was deepest and truest in my nature chafed against my useless days, longed for work, yearned to devote itself, as I had read women saints had done, to the service of the church and the poor, to the battling against sin and misery. “You will have more opportunity for doing good as a clergyman’s wife than as anything else,” was one of the pleas urged on my reluctance. My ignorance of all that marriage meant was as profound as though I had been a child of four, and my knowledge of the world was absolutely *nil*.¹³ My darling mother meant all that was happiest for me when she shielded me from all knowledge of sorrow and of sin, when she guarded me from the smallest idea of the marriage relation,¹⁴ keeping me ignorant as a baby till I left her home a wife. But looking back now on all, I deliberately say that no more fatal blunder can be made than to train a girl to womanhood in ignorance of all life’s duties and burdens, and then to let her face them for the first time away from all the old associations, the old helps, the old refuge on the mother’s breast. That “perfect innocence” may be very beautiful,

12 Anglican clergy of the second order (ranking below a bishop but above a deacon) are referred to as priests, but they are not subject to the vow of chastity taken by the Roman Catholic priesthood.

13 *Nil* is Latin for “nothing,” with the rhetorical implication of “nothing at all.”

14 Annie’s ignorance of “the marriage relation” before she was married would see a major turn-around in her later support for and publication of birth control information, particularly as she recounts this struggle in the Knowlton Trial sections of *Sketches* (XIV, XV, and XVI).

but it is a perilous possession, and Eve should have the knowledge of good and of evil ere she wanders forth from the paradise of a mother's love. When a word is never spoken to a girl that is not a caress; when necessary rebuke comes in tone of tenderest reproach; when "You have grieved me" has been the heaviest penalty for a youthful fault; when no anxiety has ever been allowed to trouble the young heart—then, when the hothouse flower is transplanted, and rough winds blow on it, it droops and fades.

The spring and summer of 1867 passed over with little of incident, save one. We quitted Harrow, and the wrench was great. My brother had left school, and had gone to Cambridge; the master, who had lived with us for so long, had married and had gone to a house of his own; my mother thought that as she was growing older, the burden of management was becoming too heavy, and she desired to seek an easier life. She had saved money enough to pay for my brother's college career, and she determined to invest the rest of her savings in a house in St. Leonard's, where she might live for part of the year, letting the house during the season. She accordingly took and furnished a house in Warrior Square, and we moved thither, saying farewell to the dear Old Vicarage, and the friends loved for so many happy years.

At the end of the summer, my mother and I went down to Manchester, to pay a long visit to the Roberts's; a very pleasant time we passed there, a large part of mine being spent on horseback, either leaping over a bar in the meadow, or scouring the country far and wide. A grave break, however, came in our mirth. The Fenian troubles were then at their height.¹⁵ On September 11th, Colonel Kelly and Captain Deasy, two Fenian leaders, were arrested in Manchester, and the Irish population was at once thrown into a terrible ferment. On the 18th, the police van containing them was returning from the Court to the County Gaol at Salford, and as it reached the railway arch which crosses the Hyde Road at Bellevue, a man sprang out, shot one of the horses, and thus stopped the van. In a moment it was surrounded by a small band, armed with revolvers and with crowbars, and the crowbars were wrenching at the locked door. A reinforcement of police was approaching, and there was no time to be lost. The

15 The Fenian Brotherhood, a secret organization devoted to overthrowing British rule in Ireland, was then trying to build its power base in England; it was named after a legendary band of Irish warriors who defended Ireland in the second and third centuries.

rescuers called to Brett, a sergeant of police who was in charge inside the van, to pass the keys out, and, on his refusal, there was a cry: "Blow off the lock!". The muzzle of a revolver was placed against the lock, and the revolver was discharged. Unhappily, poor Brett had stooped down to try and see through the keyhole what was going on outside, and the bullet, fired to blow open the lock, entered his head, and he fell dying on the floor. The rescuers rushed in, and one Allen, a lad of seventeen, opened the doors of the compartments in which were Kelly and Deasy, and hurriedly pulled them out. Two or three of the band, gathering round them, carried them off across the fields to a place of safety, while the rest gallantly threw themselves between their rescued friends and the strong body of police which charged down after the fugitives. With their revolvers pointed, they kept back the police, until they saw that the two Fenian leaders were beyond all chance of capture, and then they scattered, flying in all directions. Young William Allen, whose one thought had been for his chiefs, was the earliest victim. As he fled, he raised his hand and fired his revolver straight in the air; he had been ready to use it in defence of others, he would not shed blood for himself. Disarmed by his own act, he was set upon by the police, brutally struck down, kicked and stoned by his pursuers, and then, bruised and bleeding, he was dragged off to gaol, to meet there some of his comrades in much the same plight. The whole city of Manchester went mad over the story, and the fiercest race-passions at once blazed out into flame; it became dangerous for an Irish workman to be alone in a group of Englishmen, for an Englishman to venture into the Irish quarter of the city. The friends of the arrested Irishmen went straight to "Lawyer Roberts", and begged his aid, and he threw himself heart and soul into their defence. He soon found that the man who had fired the fatal shot was safe out of the way, having left Manchester at once, and he trusted that it would at least be possible to save his clients from the death-penalty. A Special Commission was issued, with Mr. Justice Blackburn¹⁶ at its head. "They are going to send that hanging judge," groaned Mr. Roberts when he heard it, and we felt there was small chance of escape for the prisoners. He struggled hard to have the *venue* of the trial changed, protesting that

16 Baron Colin Blackburn (1813-96) was appointed justice in 1859 and rose to the rank of justice of the high court in 1875; his other famous case took place in 1868, when he presided over the indictment of John Edward Eyre, former governor of Jamaica.

in the state of excitement in which Manchester was, there was no chance of obtaining an impartial jury. But the cry for blood and for revenge was ringing through the air, and of fairness and impartiality there was no chance. On the 25th of October, the prisoners were actually brought up before the magistrates *in irons*, and Mr. Ernest Jones, the counsel briefed to defend them, after a vain protest against the monstrous outrage, threw down his brief and quitted the Court. The trial was hurried on, and on October 29th, Allen, Larkin, Gould (O'Brien), Maguire, and Condon, stood before their judges.

We drove up to the court; the streets were barricaded; soldiers were under arms; every approach was crowded by surging throngs. At last, our carriage was stopped in the midst of excited Irishmen, and fists were shaken in the window, curses levelled at the "d——d English who were going to see the boys murdered". For a moment things were uncomfortable, for we were five women of helpless type. Then I bethought myself that we were unknown, and, like the saucy girl I was, I leant forward and touched the nearest fist. "Friends, these are Mr. Roberts' wife and daughters." "Roberts! Lawyer Roberts! God bless Roberts. Let his carriage through." And all the scowling faces became smile-wreathen, and cheers sounded out for curses, and a road was cleared for us to the steps.

Very sad was that trial. On the first day Mr. Roberts got himself into trouble which threatened to be serious. He had briefed Mr. Digby Seymour, Q.C.¹⁷ as leader, with Mr. Ernest Jones, for the defence, and he did not think that the jurymen proposed were challenged as they should be. We knew that many whose names were called were men who had proclaimed their hostility to the Irish, and despite the wrath of Judge Blackburn, Mr. Roberts would jump up and challenge them. In vain he threatened to commit the sturdy solicitor. "These men's lives are at stake, my lord," he said indignantly. At last the officers of the court were sharply told: "Remove that man," but as they advanced reluctantly—for all poor men loved and honored him—Judge Blackburn changed his mind and let him remain. At last the jury was empanelled, containing one man who had loudly proclaimed that he "didn't care what the evidence was, he would hang every d——d Irishman of the lot". In fact, the verdict was a foregone conclusion. The most disreputable evidence was admit-

17 Q.C. stands for Queen's Counsel, here representing the prosecution.

ted; the suppositions of women of lowest character were accepted as conclusive; the *alibi* for Maguire—clearly proved, and afterwards accepted by the Crown, a free pardon being issued on the strength of it—was rejected with dogged obstinacy; how premeditated was the result may be guessed from the fact that I saw—with what shuddering horror may be estimated—some official in the room behind the judges' chairs, quietly preparing the black caps¹⁸ before the verdict had been given. The verdict of "Guilty" was repeated in each of the five cases, and the prisoners were asked by the presiding judge if they had anything to say why sentence should not be passed on them. Allen spoke briefly and bravely; he had not fired a shot, but he had helped to free Kelly and Deasy; he was willing to die for Ireland. The others followed in turn, Maguire protesting his innocence, and Condon declaring also that he was not present (he also was reprieved). Then the sentence of death was passed, and "God save Ireland"! rang out in five clear voices in answer from the dock.

We had a sad scene that night; the young girl to whom poor Allen was engaged was heartbroken at her lover's doom, and bitter were her cries to "save my William!". No protests, no pleas, however, availed to mitigate the doom, and on November 23rd, Allen, Larkin, and O'Brien were hanged outside Salford gaol. Had they striven for freedom in Italy, England would have honored them as heroes; here she buried them as common murderers in quicklime in the prison yard.

I have found, with a keen sense of pleasure, that Mr. Bradlaugh¹⁹ and myself were in 1867 to some extent coworkers, although we know not of each other's existence, and although he was doing much, and I only giving such poor sympathy as a young girl might, who was only just awakening to the duty of political work. I read in the *National Reformer*²⁰ for November

18 Black caps are worn by British judges when they pronounce the death sentence.

19 This is the first mention of Charles Bradlaugh (1833-91), soon to figure so prominently in the life of Annie Besant. Leader of the National Secular Society, editor of the *National Reformer* (from its founding in 1858 until his death, with a short break 1863-66), and co-defendant in the Knowlton Trial, he was also an MP and advocate for India.

20 The weekly *National Reformer* (hereafter *NR*), founded by Bradlaugh to replace the *Investigator*, was the chief organ of the National Secular Society (hereafter *NSS*), and Annie frequently quotes from its files, especially when she herself authored the article in question.

24, 1867, that in the preceding week, he was pleading on Clerkenwell Green for these men's lives:

"According to the evidence at the trial, Deasy and Kelly were illegally arrested. They had been arrested for vagrancy of which no evidence was given, and apparently remanded for felony without a shadow of justification. He had yet to learn that in England the same state of things existed as in Ireland; he had yet to learn that an illegal arrest was sufficient ground to detain any of the citizens of any country in the prisons of this one. If he were illegally held, he was justified in using enough force to procure his release. Wearing a policeman's coat gave no authority when the officer exceeded his jurisdiction. He had argued this before Lord Chief Justice Erle in the Court of Common Pleas, and that learned judge did not venture to contradict the argument which he submitted. There was another reason why they should spare these men, although he hardly expected the Government to listen, because the Government sent down one of the judges who was predetermined to convict the prisoners; it was that the offence was purely a political one. The death of Brett was a sad mischance, but no one who read the evidence could regard the killing of Brett as an intentional murder. Legally, it was murder; morally, it was homicide in the rescue of a political captive. If it were a question of the rescue of the political captives of Varignano, or of political captives in Bourbon, in Naples, or in Poland, or in Paris, even earls might be found so to argue. Wherein is our sister Ireland less than these? In executing these men, they would throw down the gauntlet for terrible reprisals. It was a grave and solemn question. It had been said by a previous speaker that they were prepared to go to any lengths to save these Irishmen. They were not. He wished they were. If they were, if the men of England, from one end to the other, were prepared to say, "These men shall not be executed," they would not be. He was afraid they had not pluck enough for that. Their moral courage was not equal to their physical strength. Therefore he would not say that they were prepared to do so. They must plead *ad misericordiam*.²¹ He appealed to the press, which represented the power of England; to that press which in its panic-stricken moments had

21 By stating that the accused must plead *ad misericordiam*, Bradlaugh is recommending that they appeal to the court's compassion, in other words, that they should throw themselves on the mercy of the court in the more general sense of the populace at large.

done much harm, and which ought now to save these four doomed men. If the press demanded it, no Government would be mad enough to resist. The memory of the blood which was shed in 1798 rose up like a bloody ghost against them to-day.²² He only feared that what they said upon the subject might do the poor men more harm than good. If it were not so, he would coin words that should speak in words of fire. As it was, he could only say to the Government: You are strong to-day; you hold these men's lives in your hands; but if you want to reconcile their country to you, if you want to win back Ireland, if you want to make her children love you—then do not embitter their hearts still more by taking the lives of these men. Temper your strength with mercy; do not use the sword of justice like one of vengeance; for the day may come when it shall be broken in your hands, and you yourselves brained by the hilt of the weapon you have so wickedly wielded.”

In October he had printed a plea for Ireland, strong and earnest, asking:—

“Where is our boasted English freedom when you cross to Kingstown pier? Where has it been for near two years? The Habeas Corpus Act suspended, the gaols crowded, the steamers searched, spies listening at shebeen shops for sedition, and the end of it a Fenian panic in England.²³ Oh, before it be too late, before more blood shall stain the pages of our present history, before we exasperate and arouse bitter animosities, let us try and do justice to our sister land. Abolish once and for all the land laws,²⁴ which in their iniquitous operation have ruined her peas-

22 There was an unsuccessful Irish rebellion in 1798 during which the aid of Revolutionary France was sought.

23 The Habeas Corpus Act establishes the right of a citizen to obtain a written document as a protection against illegal imprisonment; the terminology is taken from the Latin “you should have the body.” Shebeen shops (chiefly Irish) are unlicensed or illegally operated drinking establishments, elsewhere known as speakeasies. Sedition refers to speaking, writing, or acting against the established government; it consists of conduct tending toward treason but not yet constituting overt action.

24 The land laws especially favored absentee English landlords at the expense of the Irish agricultural workers, who remained tenant farmers unable to establish independent income and self-sufficiency. Annie Besant (hereafter referred to as AB) would become outspoken about these laws in the pages of her own journal *Our Corner*, where in October

antry. Sweep away the leech-like Church which has sucked her vitality, and has given her back no word even of comfort in her degradation. Turn her barracks into flax mills,²⁵ encourage a spirit of independence in her citizens, restore to her people the protection of the law, so that they may speak without fear of arrest, and beg them to plainly and boldly state their grievances. Let a commission of the best and wisest amongst Irishmen, with some of our highest English judges added, sit solemnly to hear all complaints, and then let us honestly legislate, not for the punishment of the discontented, but to remove the causes of the discontent. It is not the Fenians who have depopulated Ireland's strength and increased her misery. It is not the Fenians who have evicted tenants by the score. It is not the Fenians who have checked cultivation. Those who have caused the wrong at least should frame the remedy."

VI.

In December, 1867, I was married at St. Leonards, and after a brief trip to Paris and Southsea, we went to Cheltenham, where Mr. Besant had obtained a mastership.¹ We lived at first in lodgings, and as I was very much alone, my love for reading had full swing. Quietly to myself I fretted intensely for my mother, and for the daily sympathy and comradeship that had made my life so fair. In a strange town, among strangers, with a number of ladies visiting me who talked only of servants and babies—troubles of which I knew nothing—who were profoundly uninterested in everything that had formed my previous life, in theology, in politics, in questions of social reform, and who looked on me as "strange" because I cared more for the great struggles outside

1886 she initiated a column entitled "Evictions in Ireland"; at the outset of 1887 it was retitled "The War in Ireland," now including commentary and argument in addition to statistics. See also Appendix D3 for her 1877 spirited encouragement of an alliance between British tenant farmers and the working classes.

25 To turn Ireland's barracks into flax mills would be to recall Britain's occupying military forces and to promote self-sufficient textile manufacture of linen.

1 His mastership was a teaching position in mathematics at Cheltenham College, a recently established boys' school in the resort town in Gloucester in the Cotswold hills.

than for the discussions of a housemaid's young man, or the amount of "butter when dripping would have done perfectly well, my dear," used by the cook—under such circumstances it will not seem marvellous that I felt somewhat forlorn. I found refuge, however, in books, and energetically carried on my favorite studies; next, I thought I would try writing, and took up two very different lines of composition; I wrote some short stories of a very flimsy type, and also a work of a much more ambitious character, "The Lives of the Black Letter Saints". For the sake of the uneclesiastically trained it may be well to mention that in the Calendar of the Church of England there are a number of Saints' Days; some of these are printed in red, and are Red Letter Days, for which services are appointed by the Church; others are printed in black, and are Black Letter Days, and have no special services fixed for them. It seemed to me that it would be interesting to take each of these days and write a sketch of the life of the saint belonging to it, and accordingly I set to work to do so, and gathered various books of history and legend wherefrom to collect my "facts". I don't in the least know what became of that valuable book; I tried Macmillans with it, and it was sent on by them to someone who was preparing a series of church books for the young; later I had a letter from a Church brotherhood offering to publish it, if I would give it as an "act of piety" to their order; its ultimate fate is to me unknown.

The short stories were more fortunate. I sent the first to the *Family Herald*,² and some weeks afterwards received a letter from which dropped a cheque as I opened it. Dear me! I have earned a good deal of money since by my pen, but never any that gave me the intense delight of that first thirty shillings. It was the first money I had ever earned, and the pride of the earning was added to the pride of authorship. In my childish delight and practical religion, I went down on my knees and thanked God for sending it to me, and I saw myself earning heaps of golden guineas,³ and

2 *The Family Herald: A Domestic Magazine of Useful Information and Amusement* (1842-1940) provided the following self-description on its front cover: "Select Reading for Leisure Moments. Interesting to All—Offensive to None. Facts and Philosophy for Gentlemen. Hints and Entertainments for Ladies. Questions and Diversions for Youth. Recreation and Harmless Pastime for All"; it owed much of its success to publishing the correspondence of its readership.

3 In the British monetary system of the day, a guinea was equal to twenty-one shillings, one shilling more than the twenty that constituted a pound.

becoming quite a support of the household. Besides, it was “my very own”, I thought, and a delightful sense of independence came over me. I had not then realised the beauty of the English law, and the dignified position in which it placed the married woman; I did not understand that all a married woman earned by law belonged to her owner, and that she could have nothing that belonged to her of right.⁴ I did not want the money: I was only so glad to have something of my own to give, and it was rather a shock to learn that it was not really mine at all.

From time to time after that, I earned a few pounds for stories in the same journal; and the *Family Herald*, let me say, has one peculiarity which should render it beloved by poor authors; it pays its contributor when it accepts the paper, whether it prints it immediately or not; thus my first story was not printed for some weeks after I received the cheque, and it was the same with all others accepted by the same journal. Encouraged by these small successes, I began writing a novel! It took a long time to do, but was at last finished, and sent off to the *Family Herald*. The poor thing came back, but with a kind note, telling me that it was too political for their pages, but that if I would write one of “purely domestic interest”, and up to the same level, it would probably be accepted. But by that time I was in the full struggle of theological doubt, and that novel of “purely domestic interest” never got itself written.

I contributed further to the literature of my country a theological pamphlet, of which I forget the exact title, but it dealt with the duty of fasting incumbent on all faithful Christians, and was very patristic in its tone.

In January, 1869, my little son⁵ was born, and as I was very ill for some months before, and was far too much interested in the tiny creature afterwards, to devote myself to pen and paper, my literary career was checked for a while. The baby gave a new interest and a new pleasure to life, and as we could not afford a nurse I had plenty to do in looking after his small majesty. My energy in reading became less feverish when it was done by the side of the baby’s cradle, and the little one’s presence almost healed the abiding pain of my mother’s loss.

4 “This odious law has now been altered, and a married woman is a person, not a chattel.”—AB. For more on the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 (and their amendments), see Appendix C2.

5 Arthur Digby Besant (1869-1960) was the author of *The Besant Pedigree* (1930) and longtime director of the Theosophical Bookstore in London.

I may pass very quickly over the next two years. In August, 1870, a little sister⁶ was born to my son, and the recovery was slow and tedious, for my general health had been failing for some time. I was, among other things, fretting much about my mother, who was in sore trouble. A lawyer in whom she had had the most perfect confidence betrayed it; for years she had paid all her large accounts through him, and she had placed her money in his hands. Suddenly he was discovered by his partners to have been behaving unfairly; the crash came, and my mother found that all the money given by her for discharge of liabilities had vanished, while the accounts were unpaid, and that she was involved in debt to a very serious extent. The shock was a very terrible one to her, for she was too old to begin the world afresh. She sold off all she had, and used the money, as far as it would go, to pay the debts she believed to have been long ago discharged, and she was thus left penniless after thinking she had made a little competence for her old age. Lord Hatherley's influence obtained for my brother the post of under-secretary to the Society of Arts, and also some work from the Patent Office, and my mother went to live with him. But the dependence was intolerable to her, though she never let anyone but myself know she suffered, and even I, until her last illness, never knew how great her suffering had been. The feeling of debt weighed on her, and broke her heart; all day long while my brother was at his office, through the bitter winter weather, she would sit without a fire, lighting it only a little before his home-coming, so that she might save all the expense she could; often and often she would go out about half-past twelve, saying that she was going out to lunch, and would walk about till late in the afternoon, so as to avoid the lunch-hour at home. I have always felt that the winter of 1870-1 killed her, though she lived on for three years longer; it made her an old broken woman, and crushed her brave spirit. How often I have thought since: "If only I had not left her! I should have seen she was suffering, and should have saved her." One little chance help I gave her, on a brief visit to town. She was looking very ill, and I coaxed out of her that her back was always aching, and that she never had a moment free from pain. Luckily I had that morning

6 Mabel Emily Besant Scott (1870-1952) later married and then divorced an Australian Catholic, afterward returning to Britain and assisting her mother with both Co-Masonry and Theosophy, eventually herself co-founding the Rosicrucian Theatre with George Alexander.

received a letter containing £2 2s. from my liberal *Family Herald* editor, and as, glancing round the room, I saw there were only ordinary chairs, I disregarded all questions as to the legal ownership of the money, and marched out without saying a word, and bought for £1 15s. a nice cushiony chair, just like one she used to have at Harrow, and had it sent home to her. For a moment she was distressed, but I told her I had earned the money, and so she was satisfied. "Oh, the rest!" she said softly once or twice during the evening. I have that chair still, and mean to keep it as long as I live.

In the spring of 1871 both my children were taken ill with whooping-cough. The boy, Digby, vigorous and merry, fought his way through it with no danger, and with comparatively little suffering; Mabel, the baby, had been delicate since her birth; there had been some little difficulty in getting her to breathe after she was born, and a slight tendency afterwards to lung-delicacy. She was very young for so trying a disease as whooping-cough, and after a while bronchitis set in, and was followed by congestion of the lungs. For weeks she lay in hourly peril of death; we arranged a screen round the fire like a tent, and kept it full of steam to ease the panting breath, and there I sat all through those weary weeks with her on my lap, day and night. The doctor said that recovery was impossible, and that in one of the fits of coughing she must die; the most distressing thing was that at last the giving of a drop or two of milk brought on the terrible convulsive choking, and it seemed cruel to torture the apparently dying child. At length, one morning when the doctor was there, he said that she could not last through the day; I had sent for him hurriedly, for her body had swollen up rapidly, and I did not know what had happened; the pleura of one lung had become perforated, and the air escaping into the cavity of the chest had caused the swelling; while he was there, one of the fits of coughing, came on, and it seemed as though it would be the last; the doctor took a small bottle of chloroform out of his pocket, and putting a drop on a handkerchief, held it near the child's face, till the drug soothed the convulsive struggle. "It can't do any harm at this stage," he said, "and it checks the suffering." He went away, saying that he would return in the afternoon, but he feared he would never see the child alive again. One of the kindest friends I had in my married life was that same doctor, Mr. Lauriston Winterbotham; he was as good as he was clever, and, like so many of his noble profession, he had the merits of discretion and of silence.

That chance thought of his about the chloroform, verily, I

believe, saved the child's life. Whenever one of the convulsive fits was coming on I used it, and so not only prevented to a great extent the violence of the attacks, but also the profound exhaustion that followed them, when the baby would lie as though almost dead, a mere flicker of breath at the top of the throat showing that she still lived. At last, though more than once we had thought her dead, a change took place for the better, and the child began slowly to mend. For years, however, that struggle for life left its traces on her, not only in serious lung-delicacy, but also in a form of epileptic fits. In her play she would suddenly stop, and become fixed for about a minute, and then go on again as though nothing had occurred. On her mother a more permanent trace was left.

Not unnaturally, when the child was out of danger, I collapsed from sheer exhaustion, and I lay in bed for a week. But an important change of mind dated from those silent weeks with a dying child on my knees. There had grown up in my mind a feeling of angry resentment against the God who had been for weeks, as I thought, torturing my helpless baby. For some months a stubborn antagonism to the Providence who ordained the sufferings of life had been steadily increasing in me, and this sullen challenge, "Is God good?" found voice in my heart during those silent nights and days. My mother's sufferings, and much personal unhappiness, had been intensifying the feeling, and as I watched my baby in its agony, and felt so helpless to relieve, more than once the indignant cry broke from my lips: "How canst thou torture a baby so? What has she done that she should suffer so? Why dost thou not kill her at once, and let her be at peace?" More than once I cried aloud: "O God, take the child, but do not torment her." All my personal belief in God, all my intense faith in his constant direction of affairs, all my habit of continual prayer and of realisation of his presence, were against me now. To me he was not an abstract idea, but a living reality, and all my mother-heart rose up in rebellion against this person in whom I believed, and whose individual finger I saw in my baby's agony.

At this time I met a clergyman⁷—I do not give his name lest I

7 There has been no definite identification of this unnamed clergyman, whom AB refers to by the initials W.D., although Anne Taylor makes a good case for his being Edward Walker (d. 1872), rector of the parish church at Cheltenham. In his letter of 21 April 1871, he first cites Proverbs 14:10 and then two passages from *In Memoriam* (1850), by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (vi.3-4 and i.7-8).

should injure him—whose wider and more liberal views of Christianity exercised much influence over me during the months of struggle that followed. Mr. Besant had brought him to me while the child was at her worst, and I suppose something of the “Why is it?” had, unconsciously to me, shown itself to his keen eyes. On the day after his visit, I received from him the following letter, in which unbeliever as well as believer may recognise the deep human sympathy and noble nature of the writer:—

“April 21st, 1871.

“My dear Mrs. Besant,—I am painfully conscious that I gave you but little help in your trouble yesterday. It is needless to say that it was not from want of sympathy. Perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say that it was from excess of sympathy. I shrink intensely from meddling with the sorrow of anyone whom I feel to be of a sensitive nature.

‘The heart hath its own bitterness, and the stranger meddleth not therewith.’

It is to me a positively fearful thought that I might awake such a reflection as

‘And common was the common place,
And vacant chaff well meant for grain’.

Conventional consolations, conventional verses out of the Bible, and conventional prayers are, it seems to me, an intolerable aggravation of suffering. And so I acted on a principle that I mentioned to your husband, that ‘there is no power so great as that of one human faith looking upon another human faith’. The promises of God, the love of Christ for little children, and all that has been given to us of hope and comfort, are as deeply planted in your heart as in mine, and I did not care to quote them. But when I talk face to face with one who is in sore need of them, my faith in them suddenly becomes so vast and heart-stirring that I think I must help most by talking naturally, and letting the faith find its own way from soul to soul. Indeed I could not find words for it if I tried. And yet I am compelled, as a messenger of the glad tidings of God, to solemnly assure you that all is well. We have no key to the ‘Mystery of Pain’, excepting the Cross of Christ. But there is another and a deeper solution in the hands of our Father. And it will be ours when we can understand it. There is—in the place to which we travel—some blessed explanation of your

baby's pain and your grief, which will fill with light the darkest heart. Now you must believe without having seen; that is true faith. You must

‘Reach a hand through time to catch
The far-off interest of tears’.

That you may have strength so to do is part of your share in the prayers of yours very faithfully, W.D——.”

During the summer months I saw much of this clergyman, Mr. D—— and his wife. We grew into closer intimacy in consequence of the dangerous illness of their only child, a beautiful boy a few months old. I had gained quite a name in Cheltenham as a nurse—my praises having been sung by the doctor—and Mrs. D—— felt she could trust me even with her darling boy while she snatched a night's sorely needed rest. My questionings were not shirked by Mr. D——, nor discouraged; he was neither horrified nor sanctimoniously rebuking, but met them all with a wide comprehension inexpressibly soothing to one writhing in the first agony of real doubt. The thought of hell was torturing me; somehow out of the baby's pain through those seemingly endless hours had grown a dim realisation of what hell might be, full of the sufferings of the beloved, and my whole brain and heart revolted from the unutterable cruelty of a creating and destroying God. Mr. D—— lent me Maurice and Robertson,⁸ and strove to lead me into their wider hope for man, their more trustful faith in God.

Everyone who has doubted after believing knows how, after the first admitted and recognised doubt, others rush in like a flood, and how doctrine after doctrine starts up in new and lurid light, looking so different in aspect from the fair faint outlines in which it had shone forth in the soft mists of faith. The presence of evil and pain in the world made by a “good God”, and the pain

8 Rev. Fredrick Denison Maurice (1805-72), founder of Christian Socialism, expressed a genuine and far-reaching interest in all religious beliefs; his widespread learning is reflected in his extensive bibliography, including his two examinations of the question, “What Is Revelation?” (1859; 1860), cited in the letter that follows (they are part of a published exchange with Mansel; see below). Frederick William Robertson (1816-53) was a broad-church (see note VII.7) divine best known today for his lectures delivered to the working-men's institute in Brighton (1849; 1852).

falling on the innocent, as on my seven months' old babe; the pain here reaching on into eternity unhealed; these, while I yet believed, drove me desperate, and I believed and hated, instead of like the devils, "believed and trembled".⁹ Next, I challenged the righteousness of the doctrine of the Atonement,¹⁰ and while I worshipped and clung to the suffering Christ, I hated the God who required the death-sacrifice at his hands. And so for months the turmoil went on, the struggle being all the more terrible for the very desperation with which I strove to cling to some planks of the wrecked ship of faith on the tossing sea of doubt.

After Mr. D—— left Cheltenham, as he did in the early autumn of 1871, he still aided me in my mental struggles. He had advised me to read McLeod Campbell's¹¹ work on the Atonement, as one that would meet many of the difficulties that lay on the surface of the orthodox view, and in answer to a letter dealing with this really remarkable work, he wrote (Nov. 22, 1871):

"(1) The two passages on pp. 25 and 108 you doubtless interpret quite rightly. In your third reference to pp. 117, 188, you forget one great principle—that God is impassive; cannot suffer. Christ, *quâ God*, did not suffer, but as Son of *Man* and in his *humanity*. Still, it may be correctly stated that He felt to sin and sinners 'as God eternally feels'—*i.e.*, *abhorrence of sin and love of the sinner*. But to infer from that that the Father in his Godhead feels the sufferings which Christ experienced solely in humanity, and because incarnate, is, I think, wrong.

"(2) I felt strongly inclined to blow you up for the last part of your letter. You assume, I think quite gratuitously, that God condemns the major part of his children to objectless future suffering. You say that if he does not, he places a book in their hands which threatens what he does not mean to inflict. But how utterly this seems to me opposed to the gospel of Christ. All Christ's reference to eternal punishment may be resolved into reference to

9 After Christ's death, the Jewish rulers soon "believed and trembled" in fear of the resurrection he had foretold (Matthew 20:18-19; Mark 16:8).

10 See note II.4.

11 The Scots divine John McLeod Campbell (1800-72) authored *The Nature of the Atonement* (1856), in which he tried to redirect attention from the penalty for sin toward emphasis on Christ's spiritual intervention.

the Valley of Hinnom,¹² by way of imagery; with the exception of the Dives parable, where is distinctly inferred a moral amendment beyond the grave. I speak of the unselfish desire of Dives to save his brothers.¹³ The more I see of the controversy the more baseless does the eternal punishment theory appear. It seems, then, to me, that instead of feeling aggrieved and shaken, you ought to feel encouraged and thankful that God is so much better than you were taught to believe him. You will have discovered by this time, in Maurice's 'What is Revelation' (I suppose you have the 'Sequel' too?) that God's truth *is* our truth, and his love is our love, only more perfect and full. There is no position more utterly defeated in modern philosophy and theology, than Dean Mansel's¹⁴ attempt to show that God's justice, love, etc., are different in kind from ours. Mill and Maurice, from totally alien points of view, have shown up the preposterous nature of the notion.¹⁵

"(3) A good deal of what you have thought is, I fancy, based on a strange forgetfulness of your former experience. If you have known Christ (whom to know is eternal life)—and that you have known him I am certain—can you really say that a few intellectual difficulties, nay, a few moral difficulties if you will, are able at once to obliterate the testimony of that higher state of being?

"Why, the keynote of all my theology is that Christ is loveable because, and just because, he is the perfection of all that I know to be noble and generous, and loving, and tender, and true. If an angel from heaven brought me a gospel which contained doctrines that

12 The Valley of Hinnom, a deep narrow valley outside Jerusalem (Joshua 15:18), was Christ's choice as the ultimate picture of hell; it had been an early site for human sacrifices, but in the time of Christ was a garbage dump that was horribly polluted, continually burning, and frequently the place for executions.

13 The Dives parable relates the tale of Lazarus and the rich man who was denied consolation in the afterlife and unsuccessfully sought intervention for his five brothers still living (Luke 16:19-31).

14 Dean Henry Longueville Mansel (1820-71) was a metaphysician and professor at St. John's, Oxford, where his lectures critical of deism were seen by some as undermining theism, and hence as essentially agnostic.

15 John Stuart Mill (1806-73), philosopher, politician, and advocate for women's rights, was an early and outspoken supporter of Bradlaugh as a candidate for the House of Commons; see especially his *Autobiography* (1873). Mill was the author of *Principles of Political Economy* (1852), *On Liberty* (1859), and *The Subjection of Women* (1869).

would not stand the test of such perfect loveableness—doctrines hard, or cruel, or unjust—I should reject him and his trumpery gospel with scorn, knowing that neither could be Christ”.

“Know Christ and judge religions by him; don’t judge him by religions, and then complain because you find yourself looking at him through a blood-colored glass.....

“I am saturating myself with Maurice, who is the antidote given by God to this age against all dreary doubtings and temptings of the devil to despair.”

On these lines weary strife went on for months, until at last brain and health gave way completely, and for weeks I lay prostrate and helpless, in terrible ceaseless head-pain, unable to find relief in sleep. The doctor tried every form of relief in vain; he covered my head with ice, he gave me opium—which only drove me mad—he used every means his skill could dictate to remove the pain, but all failed. At last he gave up the attempt to cure physically, and tried mental diversion; he brought me up books on anatomy and persuaded me to study them; I have still an analysis made by me at that time of Luther Holden’s “Human Osteology”.¹⁶ He was wise enough to see that if I were to be brought back to reasonable life, it could only be by diverting thought from the currents in which it had been running to a dangerous extent.

No one who has not felt it knows the fearful agony caused by doubt to the earnestly religious mind. There is in this life no other pain so horrible. The doubt seems to shipwreck everything, to destroy the one steady gleam of happiness “on the other side” that no earthly storm could obscure; to make all life gloomy with a horror of despair, a darkness that may verily be felt. Fools talk of Atheism as the outcome of foul life and vicious thought. They, in their shallow heartlessness, their brainless stupidity, cannot even dimly imagine the anguish of the mere penumbra of the eclipse of faith, much less the horror of that great darkness in which the orphaned soul cries out into the infinite emptiness: “Is it a Devil who has made this world? Are we the sentient toys of

16 As a measure of AB’s early interest in science, see the subtitle of the study of human osteology by Luther Holden (1815-1905): “Comprising a description of the bones: with delineations of the attachments of the muscles, the general and microscopic structure of the bone and its development: to which is added a brief notice of the unity of type in the construction of the vertebrate skeleton” (2nd ed. 1857).

an Almighty Power, who sports with our agony, and whose peals of awful mocking laughter echo the wailings of our despair?"

VII.

On recovering from that prostrating physical pain, I came to a very definite decision. I resolved that, whatever might be the result, I would take each dogma of the Christian religion, and carefully and thoroughly examine it, so that I should never again say "I believe" where I had not proved. So, patiently and steadily, I set to work. Four problems chiefly at this time pressed for solution. I. The eternity of punishment after death. II. The meaning of "goodness" and love" as applied to a God who had made this world with all its evil and its misery. III. The nature of the atonement of Christ, and the "justice" of God in accepting a vicarious suffering from Christ, and a vicarious righteousness from the sinner. IV. The meaning of "inspiration" as applied to the Bible, and the reconciliation of the perfection of the author with the blunders and the immoralities of the work.

Maurice's writings now came in for very careful study, and I read also those of Robertson, of Brighton, and of Stopford Brooke,¹ striving to find in these some solid ground whereon I might build up a new edifice of faith. That ground, however, I failed to find; there were poetry, beauty, enthusiasm, devotion; but there was no rock on which I might take my stand. Mansel's Bampton lectures on "The Limits of Religious Thought"² deepened and intensified my doubts. His arguments seemed to make certainty impossible, and I could not suddenly turn round and believe to order, as he seemed to recommend, because proof was beyond reach. I could not, and would not, adore in God as the highest Righteousness that which in man was condemned as harsh, as cruel, and as unjust.

In the midst of this long mental struggle, a change occurred in the outward circumstances of my life. I wrote to Lord

1 Stopford Augustus Brooke (1832-1916) was a literary cleric who shared his broad-church views with the Brighton cleric Robertson, whose life and letters he later edited (1870).

2 Mansel's eight lectures on "The Limits of Religious Thought" were delivered in Oxford in 1858 under the auspices of the foundation established by the late Rev. John Bampton and published that same year.

Hatherley and asked him if he could give Mr. Besant a Crown living,³ and he offered us first one in Northumberland, near Alnwick Castle, and then one in Lincolnshire, the village of Sibsey, with a vicarage house, and an income of £410 per annum. We decided to accept the latter.

The village was scattered over a considerable amount of ground, but the work was not heavy. The church was one of the fine edifices for which the fen country is so famous, and the vicarage was a comfortable house, with large and very beautiful gardens and paddock, and with outlying fields.⁴ The people were farmers and laborers, with a sprinkling of shopkeepers; the only “society” was that of the neighboring clergy, Tory⁵ and prim to an appalling extent. There was here plenty of time for study, and of that time I vigorously availed myself. But no satisfactory light came to me, and the suggestions and arguments of my friend Mr. D—— failed to bring conviction to my mind. It appeared clear to me that the doctrine of Eternal Punishment⁶ was taught in the Bible, and the explanations given of the word “eternal” by men like Maurice and Stanley, did not recommend themselves to me as anything more than skilful special pleading—evasions, not clearings up, of a moral difficulty. For the problem was: Given a good God, how can he have created mankind, knowing beforehand that the vast majority of those whom he had created were to be tortured for evermore? Given a just God, how can he punish people for being sinful, when they have inherited a sinful nature without their own choice and of necessity? Given a righteous God, how can he allow sin to exist for ever, so that evil shall be as eternal as good, and Satan shall reign in hell, as long as

3 A crown living is a post salaried by royal revenues and issued at the discretion of members of the aristocracy.

4 The fen country in south Lincolnshire consists of marshlands—low-lying peat-land partly covered with water. A paddock is a small enclosed field, typically adjacent to a house or stable and often used as a pasture.

5 A Tory is a member of the British political party chiefly associated with the monarchy, the established Anglican Church, and the preservation of the traditional political structure; see in relation to Whig (note V.8).

6 The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment stipulates that the damned shall experience the torments of Hell forever; this doctrine is concomitant with the notion that the sins of the damned confirm them in evil.

Christ in Heaven? The answer of the Broad church school⁷ was, that the word “eternal” applied only to God and to life which was one with his; that “everlasting” only meant “lasting for an age”, and that while the punishment of the wicked might endure for ages it was purifying, not destroying, and at last all should be saved, and “God should be all in all”. These explanations had (for a time) satisfied Mr. D——, and I find him writing to me in answer to a letter of mine dated March 25th, 1872:

“On the subject of Eternal punishment I have now not the remotest doubt. It is impossible to handle the subject exhaustively in a letter, with a sermon to finish before night. But you *must* get hold of a few valuable books that would solve all kinds of difficulties for you. For most points read Stopford Brooke’s Sermons—they are simply magnificent, and are called (1) Christian modern life, (2) Freedom in the Church of England, (3) and (least helpful) ‘Sermons’. Then again there is an appendix to Llewellyn Davies’ ‘Manifestation of the Son of God’, which treats of forgiveness in a future state as related to Christ and Bible. As to that special passage about the Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost (to which you refer), I will write you my notions on it in a future letter.”

A little later, according, he wrote:

“With regard to your passage of difficulty about the unpardonable sin, I would say: (1) If that sin is not to be forgiven in the world to come, it is implied that all other sins are forgiven in the world to come. (2) You must remember that our Lord’s parables and teachings mainly concerned contemporary events and people. I mean, for instance, that in his great prophecy of *judgment* he simply was speaking of the destruction of the Jewish polity and nation. The principles involved apply through all time, but He did not apply them except to the Jewish nation. He was speaking then, not of ‘the end of the *world*,’ (as is wrongly translated), but of ‘the end of the *age*’. (Every age is wound up with a judgment. French Revolutions, Reformations, etc., are all ends of

7 The broad church school represents the liberal viewpoints within the Church of England which support a policy of broad inclusiveness; its proponents in the nineteenth century included Kingsley, Stanley, and Robertson.

ages and judgments.) *ἄων* does not, cannot, will not, and never did mean *world*, but *age*.⁸ Well, then, he has been speaking of the Jewish people. And he says that all words spoken against the Son of Man will be forgiven. But there is a blasphemy against the Holy Spirit of God—there is a confusion of good with evil, of light with darkness—which goes deeper down than this. When a nation has lost the faculty of distinguishing love from hatred, the spirit of falsehood and hypocrisy from the spirit of truth, God from the Devil—*then its doom is pronounced*—the decree is gone forth against it. As the doom of Judaism, guilty of this sin, *was then pronounced*. As the *decree against it had already gone forth*. *It is a national warning, not an individual one. It applies to two ages of this world, and not to two worlds*. All its teaching was primarily *national*, and is only thus to be rightly read—if not all, rather *most of it*. If you would be sure of this and understand it, see the parables, etc., explained in Maurice’s ‘Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven’ (a commentary on S. Luke). I can only indicate briefly in a letter the line to be taken on this question.

“With regard to the *ελοι, ελοι, λαμα σαββαχθανυ*.⁹ I don’t believe that the Father even momentarily hid his face from Him. The life of sonship was unbroken. Remark: (1) It is a quotation from a Psalm. (2) It rises naturally to a suffering man’s lips as expressive of agony, though not exactly framed for *his* individual agony. (3) The spirit of the Psalm is one of trust, and hope, and full faith, notwithstanding the 1st verse. (4) Our Lord’s agony was very extreme, not merely of body but of *soul*. He spoke out of the desolation of one forsaken, not by his divine Father but by his human brothers. I have heard sick and dying men use the words of beloved Psalms in just such a manner.

“The impassibility of God¹⁰ (1) With regard to the Incarna-

8 AB is correct in her translation of the Greek, which comes closest to the English cognate “eon,” meaning “era” or “epoch,” as it would be annotated by any reputable biblical word commentary.

9 Translated from the New Testament Greek, these are the frequently quoted words uttered by Jesus as he is being crucified, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46), themselves invoking the first verse of the Old Testament Psalm 22; Matthew (but not Luke) treats them as Jesus’s last words. The source in Aramaic has been transliterated as “Eli, Eli (or: Eloī, Eloī), lama sabachthani.”

10 The Impassibility of God states that God is incapable of experiencing pain or suffering; the Incarnation refers to the union of divinity with humanity in the person of Jesus Christ.

tion, this presents no difficulty. Christ suffered simply and entirely as man, was too truly a man not to do so. (2) With regard to the Father, the key of it is here. 'God *is* love.' He does not need suffering to train into sympathy, because his nature is sympathy. He can afford to dispense with hysterics, because he sees ahead that his plan is working to the perfect result. I am not quite sure whether I have hit upon your difficulty here, as I have destroyed your last letter but one. But the 'Gospel of the Kingdom'¹¹ is a wonderful 'eye-opener'."

Worst of all the puzzles, perhaps, was that of the existence of evil and of misery, and the racking doubt whether God *could* be good, and yet look on the evil and the misery of the world unmoved and untouched. It seemed so impossible to believe that a Creator could be either cruel enough to be indifferent to the misery, or weak enough to be unable to stop it: the old dilemma faced me unceasingly. "If he can prevent it, and does not, he is not good; if he wishes to prevent it, and cannot, he is not almighty;" and out of this I could find no way of escape. Not yet had any doubt of the existence of God crossed my mind.

In August, 1872 Mr. D—— tried to meet this difficulty. He wrote:

"With regard to the impassibility of God, I think there is a stone wrong among your foundations which causes your difficulty. Another wrong stone is, I think, your view of the nature of the *sin* and *error* which is supposed to grieve God. I take it that sin is an absolutely necessary factor in the production of the perfect man.¹² It was foreseen and allowed as a means to an end—as in fact an education.

"The view of all the sin and misery in the world cannot grieve God, any more than it can grieve you to see Digby fail in his first attempt to build a card-castle or a rabbit-hutch. All is part of the

11 The phrase comes from the fragmentary Gnostic scriptures of the Gospel according to Mary: "Go then and preach the gospel of the kingdom" (4:37), though W.D. is undoubtedly referring back to Maurice's 18-lecture commentary on St. Luke entitled *Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven* (1864).

12 The idea that sin is necessary is curiously connected to the inheritance of original sin, which goes back to the first sin of disobedience committed by Adam and Eve. Mankind thus seems destined to sin but also to learn from the lessons of punishment and forgiveness.

training. God looks at the ideal man to which all tends. The popular idea of the fall¹³ is to me a very absurd one. There was never an ideal state in the past, but there will be in the future. The Genesis allegory simply typifies the first awakening of consciousness of good and evil—of two wills in a mind hitherto only animal-psychic.

“Well then—there being no occasion for grief in watching the progress of his own perfect and unfailing plans—your difficulty in God’s impassability vanishes. Christ, *quâ* God, was, of course, impassible too. It seems to me that your position implies that God’s ‘designs’ have partially (at least) failed, and hence the grief of perfect benevolence. Now I stoutly deny that any jot or tittle of God’s plans can fail. I believe in the ordering of all for the best. I think that the pain consequent on broken law is only an inevitable necessity, over which we shall some day rejoice.

“The indifference shown to God’s love cannot pain Him. Why? because it is simply a sign of defectiveness in the creature which the ages will rectify. The being who is indifferent is not yet educated up to the point of love. But he *will be*. The pure and holy suffering of Christ was (pardon me) wholly the consequence of his human nature. True it was because of the *perfection* of his humanity. But his Divinity had nothing to do with it. It was his human heart that broke. It was because he entered a world of broken laws and of incomplete education that he became involved in suffering with the rest of his race....

“No, Mrs. Besant; I never feel at all inclined to give up the search, or to suppose that the other side may be right. I claim no merit for it, but I have an invincible faith in the morality of God and the moral order of the world. I have no more doubt about the falsehood of the popular theology than I have about the unreality of six robbers who attacked me three nights ago in a horrid dream. I exult and rejoice in the grandeur and freedom of the little bit of truth it has been given me to see. I am told that ‘Present-day Papers’, by Bishop Ewing (edited) are a wonderful help, many of them, to puzzled people: I mean to get them. But I am sure you will find that the truth will (even so little as we may be able to find out) grow on you, make you free, light your path,

13 This reading of the fall of Adam and Eve and their banishment from the Garden of Eden differs from a fundamentalist or literal view, allowing for a more imaginative allegorical interpretation of the key event in the Book of Genesis.

and dispel, at no distant time, your *painful* difficulties and doubts. I should say on no account give up your reading. I think with you that you could not do without it. It will be a wonderful source of help and peace to you. For there are struggles far more fearful than those of intellectual doubt. I am keenly alive to the gathered-up sadness of which your last two pages are an expression. I was sorrier than I can say to read them. They reminded me of a long and very dark time in my own life, when I thought the light never would come. Thank God it came, or I think I could not have held out much longer. But you have evidently strength to bear it now. The more dangerous time, I should fancy, has passed. You will have to mind that the fermentation leaves clear spiritual wine, and not (as too often) vinegar.

"I wish I could write something more helpful to you in this great matter. But as I sit in front of my large bay window, and see the shadows on the grass and the sunlight on the leaves, and the soft glimmer of the rosebuds left by the storms, I cannot but believe that all will be very well. 'Trust in the Lord; wait patiently for him'—they are trite words.¹⁴ But he made the grass, the leaves, the rosebuds, and the sunshine, and he is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. And now the trite words have swelled into a mighty argument."

Despite reading and argument, my scepticism grew only deeper and deeper. The study of W.R. Greg's "Creed of Christendom", of Matthew Arnold's "Literature and Dogma",¹⁵ helped to widen the mental horizon, while making a return to the old faith more and more impossible. The church services were a weekly torture, but feeling as I did that I was only a doubter, I spoke to none of my doubts. It was possible, I felt, that all my difficulties might be cleared up, and I had no right to shake the faith of others while in uncertainty myself. Others had doubted and had afterwards

14 The rest of the verse reads: "fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass" (Psalm 37:7).

15 William Rathbone Greg (1809-81) was an essayist and philanthropist whose well-mannered *Creed of Christendom* (1851) was not perceived as hostile even by those who opposed his views. Matthew Arnold (1822-88), poet and literary/social critic of the first order, initially published *Literature and Dogma: An Essay towards a Better Appreciation of the Bible* in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1871; he is adjudged by many as the founder of Anglican modernism.

believed; for the doubter silence was a duty; the blinded had better keep their misery to themselves. I found some practical relief in parish work of a non-doctrinal kind, in nursing the sick, in trying to brighten a little the lot of the poor of the village[.] But here, again, I was out of sympathy with most of those around me. The movement among the agricultural laborers, due to the energy and devotion of Joseph Arch,¹⁶ was beginning to be talked of in the fens, and bitter were the comments of the farmers on it, while I sympathised with the other side. One typical case, which happened some months later, may stand as example of all. There was a young man, married, with two young children, who was wicked enough to go into a neighboring county to a "Union Meeting", and who was, further, wicked enough to talk about it when he returned. He became a marked man; no farmer would employ him. He tramped about vainly, looking for work, grew reckless, and took to drink. Visiting his cottage one day I found his wife ill, a dead child in the bed, a sick child in her arms; yes, she "was pining; there was no work to be had". "Why did she leave the dead child on the bed? because there was no other place to put it." The cottage consisted of one room and a "lean-to", and husband and wife, the child dead of fever and the younger child sickening with it, were all obliged to lie on the one bed. In another cottage I found four generations sleeping in one room, the great-grandfather and his wife, the grandmother (unmarried), the mother (unmarried), and the little child, while three men-lodgers completed the tale of eight human beings crowded into that narrow, ill-ventilated garret. Other cottages were hovels, through the broken roofs of which poured the rain, and wherein rheumatism and ague¹⁷ lived with the dwellers. How could I do aught but sympathise with any combination that aimed at the raising of these poor? But to sympathise with Joseph Arch was a crime in the eyes of the farmers, who knew that his agitation meant an increased drain on their pockets. For it never struck them that, if they paid less in rent to the absent landlord, they might pay more in wage to the laborers who helped to make their wealth, and they had only civil words for the burden that crushed

16 Joseph Arch (1826-1919), trained as a Primitive Methodist preacher, organized British agricultural laborers in their protest against low wages and harsh living conditions; he was elected president of the National Agricultural Laborers' Union when it was formed in 1872 and twice served as MP.

17 The ague is a fever marked by alternate periods of chills and sweating.

them, and harsh ones for the builders-up of their ricks and the mowers of their harvests.¹⁸ They made common cause with their enemy, instead of with their friend, and instead of leaguings themselves with the laborers, as forming together the true agricultural interest, they leagued themselves with the landlords against the laborers, and so made fratricidal strife instead of easy victory over the common foe.¹⁹

In the summer and autumn of 1872 I was a good deal in London with my mother. My health had much broken down, and after a severe attack of congestion of the lungs, my recovery was very slow. One Sunday in London, I wandered into St. George's Hall, in which Mr. Charles Voysey²⁰ was preaching, and there I bought some of his sermons. To my delight I found that someone else had passed through the same difficulties as I about hell and the Bible and the atonement and the character of God, and had given up all these old dogmas, while still clinging to belief in God. I went to St. George's Hall again on the following Sunday, and in the little ante-room, after the service, I found myself in a stream of people, who were passing by Mr. and Mrs. Voysey, some evidently known to him, some strangers, many of the latter thanking him for his morning's work. As I passed in my turn I said: "I must thank you for very great help in what you have said this morning", for indeed the possibility opened of a God who was really "loving unto every man", and in whose care each was safe for ever, had come like a gleam of light across the stormy sea of doubt and distress on which I had been tossing for nearly twelve months. On the following Sunday, I saw them again, and was cordially invited down to their Dulwich home, where they gave welcome to all in doubt. I soon found that the Theism²¹ they pro-

18 Ricks are haystacks, sometimes thatched in a way to protect them from rain.

19 AB develops this argument in detail in her 1877 *NR* article, "Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Laborers," reproduced in Appendix D3.

20 Rev. Charles Voysey (1828-1912), founder of the Theistic Church in 1871, had already published his collected sermons as *The Sling and the Stone* (1865), in which he attacked the doctrine of original sin and eternal punishment as cruel, rejected the divinity of Christ, dismissed the Atonement as unnecessary, and declared that the Bible was not the official word of God.

21 Theism, as opposed to atheism, refers to the basic belief in the existence of one or more gods, who constitute the source of creation for man and the physical world.

fessed was free from the defects which revolted me in Christianity. It left me God as a Supreme Goodness, while rejecting all the barbarous dogmas of the Christian faith. I now read Theodore Parker's "Discourse on Religion", Francis Newman's "Hebrew Monarchy", and other works, many of the essays of Miss Frances Power Cobbe²² and of other Theistic writers, and I no longer believed in the old dogmas and hated while I believed; I no longer doubted whether they were true or not; I shook them off, once for all, with all their pain, and horror, and darkness, and felt, with relief and joy inexpressible, that they were all but the dreams of ignorant and semi-savage minds, not the revelation of a God. The last remnant of Christianity followed swiftly these cast-off creeds, though, in parting with this, one last pang was felt. It was the doctrine of the Deity of Christ.²³ The whole teaching of the Broad Church School tends, of course, to emphasise the humanity at the expense of the Deity of Christ, and when the eternal punishment and the substitutionary atonement had vanished, there seemed to be no sufficient reason left for so stupendous a miracle as the incarnation of the Deity. I saw that the idea of incarnation was common to all Eastern creeds, not peculiar to Christianity; the doctrine of the unity of God repelled the doctrine of the incarnation of a portion of the Godhead. But the doctrine was dear from association; there was something at once soothing and ennobling in the idea of a union between Man and God, between a perfect man and divine supremacy, between a human heart and an almighty strength. Jesus as God was interwoven with all art, with all beauty in religion; to break with the Deity of Jesus was to

22 Theodore Parker (1810-60), an American Unitarian, published views that had already exceeded the beliefs of his fellows; Professor Francis William Newman (1805-97), younger brother of Cardinal John Henry Newman, had evolved from Calvinism into theism; and Frances Power Cobbe (1822-1904), the English editor of Parker's works, was also a sometime Unitarian preacher, social reformer, and advocate of women's suffrage (based on some of her own earlier *NR* articles, AB would publish in 1885 "A World without God," which was largely a response to one of Cobbe's articles; for a comparable essay by AB published two years later, see "Why I Don't Believe in God," excerpted in Appendix A2).

23 The Doctrine of the Deity of Christ states that Christ is the son of God and participates in the Godhead as a supernatural being, as opposed to seeing him only as an historical figure; this latter approach came into vogue in the nineteenth century under the auspices of Higher Criticism.

break with music, with painting, with literature; the Divine Child in his mother's arms, the Divine Man in his Passion and in his triumph, the human friend encircled with the majesty of the Godhead—did inexorable Truth demand that this ideal figure, with all its pathos, its beauty, its human love, should pass into the Pantheon of the dead Gods of the Past?

VIII.

The struggle was a sharp one ere I could decide that intellectual honesty demanded that the question of the Deity of Christ should be analysed as strictly as all else, and that the conclusions come to from an impartial study of facts should be faced as steadily as though they dealt with some unimportant question. I was bound to recognise, however, that more than intellectual honesty would be here required, for if the result of the study were—as I dimly felt it would be—to establish disbelief in the supernatural claims of Christ, I could not but feel that such disbelief would necessarily entail most unpleasant external results. I might give up belief in all save this, and yet remain a member of the Church of England: views on Inspiration, on Eternal Torture, on the Vicarious Atonement, however heterodox, might be held within the pale of the Church; many broad church clergymen rejected these as decidedly as I did myself, and yet remained members of the Establishment; the judgment on “*Essays and Reviews*”¹ gave this wide liberty to heresy within the Church, and a laywoman might well claim the freedom of thought legally bestowed on divines. The name “Christian” might well be worn while Christ was worshipped as God, and obeyed as the “Revealer of the Father's will”, the “well-beloved Son”, the “Savior and Lord of men”. But once challenge that unique position, once throw off that supreme sovereignty, and then it seemed to me that the name “Christian” became a hypocrisy, and its renouncement a duty incumbent on an upright mind. But I was a clergyman's wife; my position made my participation in the Holy Communion a necessity, and my withdrawal therefrom

1 *Essays and Reviews* (1860) was a collection of articles that questioned many aspects of faith and religion and tried to vindicate the potential heresy of divines who chose to challenge orthodox views; among its contributors were Benjamin Jowett and Frederick Temple, Bishop of Exeter.

would be an act marked and commented upon by all. Yet if I lost my faith in Christ, how could I honestly approach “the Lord’s Table”, where Christ was the central figure and the recipient of the homage paid there by every worshipper to “God made man”? Hitherto mental pain alone had been the price demanded inexorably from the searcher after truth; now to the inner would be added the outer warfare, and how could I tell how far this might carry me?

One night only I spent in this struggle over the question: “Shall I examine the claims to Deity of Jesus of Nazareth?”² When morning broke the answer was clearly formulated: “Truth is greater than peace or position. If Jesus be God, challenge will not shake his Deity; if he be Man, it is blasphemy to worship him.” I re-read Liddon’s “Bampton Lectures” on this controversy and Renan’s, “*Vie de Jésus*”.³ I studied the Gospels, and tried to represent to myself the life there outlined; I tested the conduct there given as I should have tested the conduct of any ordinary historical character; I noted that in the Synoptics⁴ no claim to Deity was made by Jesus himself, nor suggested by his disciples; I weighed his own answer to an enquirer, with its plain disavowal of Godhood: “Why callest thou me good? There is none good save one, that is God” (Matt. xix., 17); I conned over his prayers to “my Father”, his rest on divine protection, his trust in a power greater than his own; I noted his repudiation of divine knowledge: “Of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, *neither the Son*, but the Father” (Mark xiii., 32). I studied the meaning of his prayer of anguished submission: “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me! nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt” (Matt. xxvi., 39); I dwelt on his bitter cry in his dying agony: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt. xxvii., 46); I asked the meaning of the final words of rest: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke xxiii., 46). And I saw that, if there

2 Nazareth, an historic city of Lower Galilee in northern Israel, was closely associated with the childhood of Jesus Christ and is a center of Christian pilgrimage.

3 Ernest Renan (1823-92) was the author of *La Vie de Jésus* (The Life of Jesus; 1864); AB would have read it in the original French.

4 The Synoptics constitute a correlation of the first three Gospels of the New Testament (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), as distinguished from the fourth (John), due to their many agreements in subject, order, and language; cf. Annie’s own comparative study in Section IV.

were any truth in the Gospels at all, they told the story of a struggling, suffering, sinning, praying man, and not of a God at all, and the dogma of the Deity of Christ followed the rest of the Christian doctrines into the limbo of past beliefs.

Yet one other effort I made to save myself from the difficulties I foresaw in connexion with this final breach with Christianity. There was one man who had in former days wielded over me a great influence, one whose writings had guided and taught me for many years—Dr. Pusey, the venerable leader of the Catholic party in the Church, the learned Patristic scholar, full of the wisdom of antiquity. He believed in Christ as God; what if I put my difficulties to him? If he resolved them for me I should escape the struggle I foresaw; if he could not resolve them, then no answer to them was to be hoped for. My decision was quickly made; being with my mother, I could write to him unnoticed, and I sat down and put my questions clearly and fully, stating my difficulties and asking him whether, out of his wider knowledge and deeper reading, he could resolve them for me. I wish I could here print his answer, together with two or three other letters I received from him, but the packet was unfortunately stolen from my desk and I have never recovered it.⁵ Dr. Pusey advised me to read Liddon's "Bampton Lectures", referred me to various passages, chiefly from the Fourth Gospel, if I remember rightly, and invited me to go down to Oxford and talk over my difficulties. Liddon's "Bampton Lectures" I had thoroughly studied, and the Fourth Gospel had no weight with me, the arguments in favor of its Alexandrian origin⁶ being familiar to me, but I determined to accept his invitation to a personal interview, regarding it as the last chance of remaining in the Church.

To Oxford, accordingly, I took the train, and made my way to the famous Doctor's rooms. I was shown in, and saw a short, stout gentleman, dressed in a cassock,⁷ and looking like a comfortable monk; but the keen eyes, steadfastly gazing straight into

5 When she reports that her correspondence with Pusey "was unfortunately stolen from my desk," she implies that the packet was removed by her husband Frank, probably in an effort to substantiate her heresy; there is no suggestion of this theft in *An Autobiography*.

6 The Alexandrian origin purported to the Book of John and its later date of composition compared to the first three Gospels have resulted in its historical authenticity being denied outside the Catholic Church.

7 A cassock is a close-fitting, floor-length garment worn under other vestments by the clergy, usually during divine service.

mine, told me of the power and subtlety hidden by the unprepossessing form. The head was fine and impressive, the voice low, penetrating, drilled into a somewhat monotonous and artificially subdued tone. I quickly found that no sort of enlightenment could possibly result from our interview. He treated me as a penitent going to confession,⁸ seeking the advice of a director, not as an enquirer struggling after truth, and resolute to obtain some firm standing-ground in the sea of doubt, whether on the shores of orthodoxy or of heresy. He would not deal with the question of the Deity of Jesus as a question for argument; he reminded me: "You are speaking of your judge," when I pressed some question. The mere suggestion of an imperfection in Jesus' character made him shudder in positive pain, and he checked me with raised hand, and the rebuke: "You are blaspheming; the very thought is a terrible sin". I asked him if he could recommend to me any books which would throw light on the subject: "No, no, you have read too much already. You must pray; you must pray." Then, as I said that I could not believe without proof, I was told: "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed,"⁹ and my further questioning was checked by the murmur: "O my child, how undisciplined! how impatient!". Truly, he must have found in me—hot, eager, passionate in my determination to know, resolute not to profess belief while belief was absent—but very little of that meek, chastened, submissive spirit to which he was accustomed in the penitents wont to seek his counsel as their spiritual guide. In vain did he bid me pray as though I believed; in vain did he urge the duty of blind submission to the authority of the Church, of yielding, unreasoning faith, which received but questioned not. He had no conception of the feelings of the sceptical spirit; his own faith was solid as a rock—firm, satisfied, unshakable; he would as soon have committed suicide as have doubted of the infallibility of the "Universal Church".¹⁰

8 "A penitent going to confession" would be someone who is repenting for a sin by participating in the sacrament of confession, that is, seeking absolution from a priest in the Roman Catholic confessional.

9 The full quotation from John 20:29 reads: "Jesus saith unto him, Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed."

10 The Universal Church refers to an ecumenical or worldwide belief system of Christianity, which holds the view that all men will ultimately be saved, that all men of goodwill eventually overcome evil; in our present day, it is often closely associated with Unitarianism (see note XII.10).

"It is not your duty to ascertain the truth," he told me sternly. "It is your duty to accept and to believe the truth as laid down by the Church; at your peril you reject it; the responsibility is not yours so long as you dutifully accept that which the Church has laid down for your acceptance. Did not the Lord promise that the presence of the Spirit should be ever with his Church, to guide her into all truth?"

"But the fact of the promise and its value are the very points on which I am doubtful," I answered.

He shuddered. "Pray, pray," he said. "Father, forgive her, for she knows not what she says."¹¹

It was in vain I urged that I had everything to gain and nothing to lose by following his directions, but that it seemed to me that fidelity to truth forbade a pretended acceptance of that which was not believed.

"Everything to lose? Yes, indeed. You will be lost for time and lost for eternity."

"Lost or not," I rejoined, "I must and will try to find out what is true, and I will not believe till I am sure."

"You have no right to make terms with God," he answered, "as to what you will believe and what you will not believe. You are full of intellectual pride."

I sighed hopelessly. Little feeling of pride was there in me just then, and I felt that in this rigid unyielding dogmatism there was no comprehension of my difficulties, no help for me in my struggles. I rose and, thanking him for his courtesy, said that I would not waste his time further, that I must go home and just face the difficulties out, openly leaving the Church and taking the consequences. Then for the first time his serenity was ruffled.

"I forbid you to speak of your disbelief," he cried. "I forbid you to lead into your own lost state the souls for whom Christ died."

Slowly and sadly I took my way back to the station, knowing that my last chance of escape had failed me. I recognised in this famous divine the spirit of the priest, which could be tender and pitiful to the sinner, repentant, humble, submissive, craving only for pardon and for guidance, but which was iron to the doubter, to the heretic, and would crush out all questionings of "revealed truth", silencing by force, not by argument, all challenge of the

11 This statement is a paraphrase of Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do," expressed by Jesus while the Roman soldiers divide up his clothing and cast lots for it.

traditions of the Church. Out of such men were made the Inquisitors¹² of the Middle Ages, perfectly conscientious, perfectly rigid, perfectly merciless to the heretic. To them heretics were and are centres of infectious disease, and charity to them “the worst cruelty to the souls of men”. Certain that they hold “by no merit of our own, but by the mercy of our God the one truth which he hath revealed”, they can permit no questionings, they can accept nought but the most complete submission. But while man aspires after truth, while his brain yearns after knowledge, while his intellect soars upward into the heaven of speculation and “beats the air with tireless wing”, so long shall those who demand faith be met by challenge for proof, and those who would blind him shall be defeated by his determination to gaze unblenching on the face of Truth, even though her eyes should turn him into stone.

During this same visit to London I saw Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Scott¹³ for the first time. I had gone down to Dulwich to see Mr. and Mrs. Voysey, and after dinner we went over to Upper Norwood, and I was introduced to one of the most remarkable men I have ever met. At that time Mr. Scott was an old man, with beautiful white hair, and eyes like those of a hawk gleaming from under shag eyebrows; he had been a man of magnificent physique, and though his frame was then enfeebled, the splendid lion-like head kept its impressive strength and beauty; and told of a unique personality. Of Scotch descent and well-born, Thomas Scott had, as a boy, been a page at the French Court; his manhood was spent in many lands, for he “was a mighty hunter”, though not “before the Lord”. He had lived for months among the North American Indians, sharing the hardships of their wild life; he had hunted and fished all over the world. At last, he came home, married, and ultimately settled down at Ramsgate, where he made his home a centre of heretical thought. He issued an enormous number of tracts and pamphlets, and each month he sent out a small packet to hundreds of subscribers and friends. This monthly issue of heretical literature soon made itself a

12 The Inquisitors of the Middle Ages were officials of the Roman Catholic ecclesiastical tribunals who sought to uncover and punish heresy; they were known for the extreme severity of their proceedings.

13 Thomas Scott (1808-78), freethinker and publisher, printed at his own expense a series of tracts advocating “free enquiry and the free expression of opinion” (1862-77); besides AB, his contributors included Newman, Greg, Voysey, Conway, Maitland, Bray, and Suffield.

power in the world of thought; the tracts were of various shades of opinion, but were all heretical: some moderate, some extreme; all were well-written, cultured and polished in tone—this was a rule to which Mr. Scott made no exceptions; his writers might say what they liked, but they must have something real to say, and they must say that something in good English. The little white packets found their way into many a quiet country parsonage, into many a fashionable home. His correspondence was world-wide and came from all classes—now a letter from a Prime Minister, now one from a blacksmith. All were equally welcome, and all were answered with equal courtesy. At his house met people of the most varying opinions. Colenso, Bishop of Natal, Edward Maitland, E. Vansittart Neale, Charles Bray, Sara Hennell, W.J. Birch, R. Suffield,¹⁴ and hundreds more, clerics and laymen, scholars and thinkers, all gathered in this one home, to which the right of *entrée* was gained only by love of Truth and desire to spread Freedom among men.

Mr. Scott devoted his fortune to this great work. He would never let publishers have his pamphlets in the ordinary way of trade, but issued them all himself and distributed them gratuitously. If anyone desired to subscribe, well and good, they might help in the work, but make it a matter of business he would not. If anyone sent money for some tracts, he would send out double the worth of the money enclosed, and thus for years he carried on this splendid propagandist work. In all he was nobly seconded by his wife, his “right hand” as he well named her, a sweet, strong, gentle, noble woman, worthy of her husband, and than that no higher praise can be spoken. Of both I shall have more to say hereafter, but at present we are at the time of my first visit to them at Upper Norwood, whither they had removed from Ramsgate.

Kindly greeting was given by both, and on Mr. Voysey suggesting that judging by one essay of mine that he had seen—an essay which was later expanded into the one on “Inspiration”, in the Scott series—my pen would be useful for propagandist work, Mr. Scott bade me try what I could do, and send him for criti-

14 Among those listed, it is worth noting Edward Maitland (1824-97), mystical and Hermetic humanitarian; Edward Vansittart Neale (1810-92), Christian Socialist and Co-operativist; Charles Bray (1811-84), socialist philosopher and close friend of novelist George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans); and Sara Sophia Hennell (1812-99), Bray's sister-in-law, who refused to translate David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (The Life of Jesus; 1835) but helped Eliot do so (1846).

cism anything I thought good enough for publication; he did not, of course, promise to accept an essay, but he promised to read it. A question arose as to the name to be attached to the essay, in case of publication, and I told him that my name was not my own to use, and that I did not suppose that Mr. Besant could possibly, in his position, give me permission to attach it to a heretical essay; we agreed that any essays I might write should for the present be published anonymously, and that I should try my hand to begin with on the subject of the "Deity of Jesus of Nazareth".¹⁵ And so I parted from those who were to be such good friends to me in the coming time of struggle.

IX.

My resolve was now made, and henceforth there was at least no more doubt so far as my position towards the Church was concerned. I made up my mind to leave it, but was willing to make the leaving as little obtrusive as possible. On my return to Sibsey I stated clearly the ground on which I stood. I was ready to attend the Church services, joining in such parts as were addressed to "the Supreme Being", for I was still heartily Theistic; "the Father", shorn of all the horrible accessories hung round him by Christianity, was still to me an object of adoration, and I could still believe in and worship One who was "righteous in all His ways, and holy in all His works", although the Moloch¹ to whom was sacrificed the well-beloved son had passed away for ever from my creed. Christian I was not, though Theist I was, and I felt that the wider and more generous faith would permit me to bow to the common God with my Christian brethren, if only I was not compelled to pay homage to that "Son of Man" whom Christians believed divine, homage which to me had become

15 Scott published *On the Deity of Jesus of Nazareth*, AB's first Freethought essay, anonymously in 1872, listing it as "By the wife of a beneficed clergyman"; she would later write an extension of this pamphlet for Scott (edited and prefaced by Voysey) by comparing the Synoptic Gospels with the Book of John, eventually including it as the first in her collection of essays entitled *My Path to Atheism*. For a list of many of AB's pre-Theosophist pamphlets, see the Select Bibliography.

1 Moloch is being used as a stand-in for God-the-Father; taken from the name of an ancient Semitic deity, Moloch refers to any tyrannical power that must be propitiated by subservience or sacrifice.

idolatry, insulting to the “One God”, to him of whom Jesus himself had spoken as of “my God and your God”.

Simply enough was the difficulty arranged for the moment. It was agreed that I should withdraw myself from the “Holy Communion”—for in that service, full of the recognition of Jesus as Deity, I could not join without hypocrisy. The ordinary services I would attend, merely remaining silent during those portions of them in which I could not honestly take part, and while I knew that these changes in a clergyman’s wife could not pass unnoticed in a country village, I yet felt that nothing less than this was consistent with barest duty. While I had merely doubted, I had kept silence, and no act of mine had suggested doubt to others. Now that I had no doubt that Christianity was a delusion, I would no longer act as though I believed that to be of God which heart and intellect rejected as untrue.

For a while all went smoothly. I daresay the parishioners gossiped about the absence of their vicar’s wife from the Sacrament,² and indeed I remember the pain and trembling where-with, on the first “Sacrament Sunday” after my return, I rose from my seat and walked quietly from the church, leaving the white-spread altar. That the vicar’s wife should “communicate” was as much a matter of course as that the vicar should “administer”; I had never in my life taken public part in anything that made me noticeable in any way among strangers, and still I can recall the feeling of deadly sickness that well nigh overcame me, as rising to go out I felt that every eye in the church was on me, and that my exit would be the cause of unending comment. As a matter of fact, everyone thought that I was taken suddenly ill, and many were the calls and enquiries on the following day. To any direct question, I answered quietly that I was unable to take part in the profession of faith required from an honest communicant, but the statement was rarely necessary, for the idea of heresy in a vicar’s wife did not readily suggest itself to the ordinary bucolic mind, and I did not proffer information when it was unasked for.

It happened that, shortly after that (to me) memorable Christmas of 1872, a sharp epidemic of typhoid fever³ broke out in the

2 Here the Sacrament in question means the taking of Communion.

3 Typhoid is a highly communicable disease, especially prevalent in the crowded urban centers of the nineteenth century, that is characterized by high fever, delirium, and intense body rash; it is largely transmitted by lice.

village of Sibsey. The drainage⁴ there was of the most primitive type, and the contagion spread rapidly. Naturally fond of nursing, I found in this epidemic work just fitted to my hand, and I was fortunate enough to be able to lend personal help that made me welcome in the homes of the stricken poor. The mothers who slept exhausted while I watched beside their darlings' bedsides will never, I like to fancy, think over harshly of the heretic whose hand was as tender and often more skilful than their own. I think Mother Nature meant me for a nurse, for I take a sheer delight in nursing anyone, provided only that there is peril in the sickness, so that there is the strange and solemn feeling of the struggle between the human skill one wields and the supreme enemy, Death. There is a strange fascination in fighting Death, step by step, and this is of course felt to the full where one fights for life as life, and not for a life one loves. When the patient is beloved, the struggle is touched with agony, but where one fights with Death over the body of a stranger, there is a weird enchantment in the contest without personal pain, and as one forces back the hated foe there is a curious triumph in the feeling which marks the death-grip yielding up its prey, as one snatches back to earth the life which had well-nigh perished.

Meanwhile, the promise to Mr. Scott was not forgotten, and I penned the essay on "The Deity of Jesus of Nazareth" which stands first in the collection of essays published later under the title, "My Path to Atheism". The only condition annexed to my sending it to Mr. Scott was the perfectly fair one that if published it should appear without my name. Mr. Scott was well pleased with the essay, and before long it was printed as one of the "Scott Series", to my great delight.

But unfortunately a copy sent to a relative⁵ of Mr. Besant's brought about a storm. That gentleman did not disagree with it—indeed he admitted that all educated persons must hold the views put forward—but what would Society say? What would "the county families" think if one of the clerical party was known to

4 Drainage refers particularly to the sewage or sanitation system—or lack thereof; this was in general a problem for Victorian Britain that was much in need of reform.

5 The relative is unquestionably Frank's elder brother, Sir Walter Besant (1836-1901), literary critic and novelist, whose own *Autobiography* (1902) shows him to be much in accord with AB's religious line of thinking, particularly with respect to the Atonement; she does not discuss this incident in *An Autobiography*.

be a heretic. This dreadful little paper bore the inscription "By the wife of a beneficed clergyman"; what would happen if the "wife of the beneficed clergyman" were identified with Mrs. Besant of Sibsey?

After some thought I made a compromise. Alter or hide my faith I would not, but yield personal feelings I would. I gave up my correspondence with Mr. and Mrs. Voysey, which might, it was alleged, be noticed in the village and so give rise to mischievous gossip. In this Mr. and Mrs. Voysey most generously helped me, bidding me rest assured of their cordial friendship while counselling me for awhile to cease the correspondence which was one of the few pleasures of my life, but was not part of my duty to the higher and freer faith which we had all embraced. With keen regret I bade them for awhile farewell, and went back to my lonely life.

In that spring of 1873, I delivered my first lecture. It was delivered to no one, queer as that may sound to my readers. And indeed, it was queer altogether. I was learning to play the organ, and was in the habit of practising in the church by myself, without a blower.⁶ One day, being securely locked in, I thought I would like to try how "it felt" to speak from the pulpit. Some vague fancies were stirring in me, that I could speak if I had the chance; very vague they were, for the notion that I might ever speak on the platform had never dawned on me; only the longing to find outlet in words was in me; the feeling that I had something to say, and the yearning to say it. So, queer as it may seem, I ascended the pulpit in the big, empty, lonely church, and there and then I delivered my first lecture! I shall never forget the feeling of power and of delight which came upon me as my voice rolled down the aisles, and the passion in me broke into balanced sentences, and never paused for rhythmical expression, while I felt that all I wanted was to see the church full of upturned faces, instead of the emptiness of the silent pews. And as though in a dream the solitude became peopled, and I saw the listening faces and the eager eyes, and as the sentences came unbidden from my lips, and my own tones echoed back to me from the pillars of the ancient church, I knew of a verity that the gift of speech was mine, and that if ever—and it seemed then so impossible—if ever

6 An organ blower sends compressed air to a bellows, which in turn supplies wind to the pipes, or whistles, to produce sound. In essence, AB is saying that she turned the blower off so that she could practice with a silent keyboard.

the chance came to me of public work, that at least this power of melodious utterance should win hearing for any message I had to bring.

But that knowledge remained a secret all to my own self for many a long month, for I quickly felt ashamed of that foolish speechifying in an empty church, and I only recall it now because, in trying to trace out one's mental growth, it is only fair to notice the first silly striving after that expression in spoken words, which, later, has become to me one of the deepest delights of life. And indeed none can know save they who have felt it what joy there is in the full rush of language which moves and sways; to feel a crowd respond to the lightest touch; to see the faces brighten or graven at your bidding; to know that the sources of human passion and human emotion gush at the word of the speaker, as the stream from the riven rock; to feel that the thought that thrills through a thousand hearers has its impulse from you and throbs back to you the fuller from a thousand heart-beats; is there any joy in life more brilliant than this, fuller of passionate triumph, and of the very essence of intellectual delight?

My pen was busy, and a second pamphlet, dealing with the Johannine gospel,⁷ was written and sent up to Mr. Scott under the same conditions of anonymity as before, for it was seen that my authorship could in nowise be suspected, and Mr. Scott paid me for my work. I had also made a collection of Theistic, but non-Christian, hymns,⁸ with a view of meeting a want felt by Mr. Voysey's congregation at St. George's Hall, and this was lying idle, while it might be utilised. So it was suggested that I should take up again my correspondence with Mr. and Mrs. Voysey, and glad enough was I to do so. During this time my health was rapidly failing, and in the summer of 1873 it broke down completely. At last I went up to London to consult a physician, and was told I was suffering from general nervous exhaustion, which was accompanied by much disturbance of the functions of the heart. "There is no organic disease yet," said Dr. Sibson, "but there soon will be, unless you can completely change your manner of life." Such a change was not possible, and I grew

7 The Johannine Gospel is the by-then controversial fourth gospel, which has been shown to differ in various ways from the Synoptics, or first three Gospels; see note VIII.4.

8 This collection of Theistic hymns prefigures her volume of Freethought songs for funeral services (1875); see Appendix D2.

rapidly worse. The same bad adviser who had before raised the difficulty of "what will Society say?" again interfered, and urged that pressure should be put on me to compel me at least to conform to the outward ceremonies of the Church, and to attend the Holy Communion. This I was resolved not to do, whatever might be the result of my "obstinacy", and the result was not long in coming.

I had been with the children to Southsea, to see if the change would restore my shattered health, and stayed in town with my mother on my return under Dr. Sibson's care. Very skilful and very good to me was Dr. Sibson, giving me for almost nothing all the wealthiest could have bought with their gold, but he could not remove all then in my life which made the re-acquiring of health impossible. What the doctor could not do, however, others did. It was resolved that I should either resume attendance at the Communion, or should not return home; hypocrisy or expulsion—such was the alternative; I chose the latter.

A bitterly sad time followed; my dear mother was heartbroken; to her, with her wide and vague form of Christianity, loosely held, the intensity of my feeling that where I did not believe I would not pretend belief, was incomprehensible. She recognised far more fully than I all that a separation from my home meant for me, and the difficulties which would surround a young woman not yet six-and-twenty, living alone. She knew how brutally the world judges, and how the mere fact that a woman is young and alone justifies any coarseness of slander. Then, I did not guess how cruel men and women could be, but knowing it from eleven years' experience, I deliberately say that I would rather go through it all again with my eyes wide open from the first, than have passed those eleven years "in Society" under the burden of an acted lie.

But the struggle was hard when she prayed me for her sake to give way; against harshness I had been rigid as steel, but to remain steadfast when my darling mother, whom I loved as I loved nothing else on earth, begged me on her knees to yield, was indeed hard. I felt as though it must be a crime to refuse submission when she urged it, but still—to live a lie? Not even for her was that possible.

Then there were the children, the two little ones who worshipped me, I who was to them mother, nurse, and playfellow. Were these also to be resigned? For awhile, at least, this complete loss was spared me, for facts (which I have not touched on in this record) came accidentally to my brother's knowledge, and he

resolved that I should have the protection of legal separation, and should not be turned wholly penniless and alone into the world.⁹ So, when everything was arranged, I found myself possessed of my little girl, of complete personal freedom, and of a small monthly income sufficient for respectable starvation.

X.

The “world was all before us where to choose”, but circumstances narrowed the choice down to Hobson’s.¹ I had no ready money beyond the first month’s payment of my annuity;² furnished lodgings were beyond my means, and I had nothing wherewith to buy furniture. My brother offered me a home, on condition that I should give up my “heretical friends” and keep quiet; but, being freed from one bondage, nothing was further from my thoughts than to enter another. Besides, I did not choose to be a burden on anyone, and I resolved to “get something to do”, to rent a tiny house, and to make a nest where my mother, my little girl, and I could live happily together. The difficulty was the “something”; I spent various shillings in agencies, with a quite wonderful unanimity of failures. I tried to get some fancy needlework, advertised as an infallible source of income to “ladies in reduced circumstances”; I fitted the advertisement admirably, for I was a lady, and my circumstances were decidedly reduced, but I only earned 4s. 6d. by weeks of stitching, and the materials cost nearly as much as the finished work. I experimented with a Birmingham firm, who generously offered everyone an opportunity of adding to their incomes, and received in answer to the small fee demanded a pencil-case, with an explanation that I was to sell little articles of that description—going

9 The deed of separation, executed 25 October 1873, gave AB the custody of her daughter Mabel, while Frank Besant retained the right to raise Digby.

1 Taken from seventeenth-century liveryman Thomas Hobson’s practice of making every customer take the horse nearest the door, the term Hobson’s choice refers to the apparent freedom to take or reject something when in fact no alternative exists.

2 Akin to a form of alimony, her annuity is the monthly allowance she receives from her husband under the deed of separation; it amounted to £110 a year, about a quarter of Frank’s annual stipend.

as far as cruet-stands³—to my friends; I did not feel equal to springing pencil-cases and cruet-stands casually on my acquaintances, so did not start in that business. It would be idle to relate all the things I tried, and failed in, until I began to think that the “something to do” was not so easy to find as I had expected.

I made up my mind to settle at Upper Norwood, near Mr. and Mrs. Scott, who were more than good to me in my trouble; and I fixed on a very little house in Colby Road, Gipsy Hill, to be taken from the ensuing Easter. Then came the question of furniture; a friend of Mr. Scott’s gave me an introduction to a manufacturer, who agreed to let me have furniture for a bedroom and sitting-room, and to let me pay him by monthly instalments. The next thing was to save a few months’ annuity, and so have a little money in hand, wherewith to buy necessities on starting, and to this end I decided to accept a loving invitation to Folkestone, where my grandmother was living with two of my aunts, and there to seek some employment, no matter what, provided it gave me food and lodging, and enabled me to put aside my few pounds a month.

Relieved from the constant strain of fear and anxiety, my health was quickly improving, and the improvement became more rapid after I went down with my mother to Folkestone. The hearty welcome offered to me there was extended with equal warmth to little Mabel, who soon arrived, a most forlorn little maiden. She was only three years old, and she had not seen me for some weeks; her passion of delight was pitiful; she clung to me, in literal fashion, for weeks afterwards, and screamed if she lost sight of me for a moment; it was long before she got over the separation and the terror of her lonely journey from Sibsey and London in charge only of the guard. But she was a “winsome wee thing”, and danced into everyone’s heart; after “mamma”, “granny” was the prime favorite, and my dear mother worshipped her first grand-daughter; never was prettier picture than the red-golden hair nestled against the white, the baby-grace contrasting with the worn stateliness of her tender nurse. From that time forward—with the exception of a few weeks of which I shall speak presently and of the yearly stay of a month with her father—little Mabel was my constant companion, until Sir

3 Cruet-stands are devices to hold glass bottles or other vessels designed to contain vinegar or water at the table, or to contain wine or water for an altar service.

George Jessel's⁴ brutality robbed me of my child. She would play contentedly while I was working, a word now and again enough to make her happy; when I had to go out without her she would run to the door with me, and the "good-bye" came from down-curved lips, and she was ever watching at the window for my return, and the sunny face was always the first to welcome me home. Many and many a time have I been coming home, weary and heartsick, and the glimpse of the little face watching has reminded me that I must not carry in a grave face to sadden my darling, and the effort to throw off the dreariness for her sake shook it off altogether, and brought back the sunshine. I have never forgiven Sir George Jessel, and I never shall, though his death has left me only his memory to hate.

At Folkestone, I continued my search for "something to do", and for some weeks sought for pupils, thinking I might thus turn my heresy to account. But pupils are not readily attainable by a heretic woman, away from her natural home, and with a young child as "encumbrance". It chanced, however, that the vicar of Folkestone, Mr. Woodward, was then without a governess, and his wife was in very delicate health. My people knew him well, and as I had plenty of spare time, I offered to teach the children for a few hours a day. The offer was gladly accepted, and I soon arranged to go and stay at the house for awhile, until he could find a regular governess. I thought that at least I could save my small income while I was there, and Mabel and I were to be boarded and lodged in exchange for my work. This work was fairly heavy, but I did not mind that; it soon became heavier. Some serious fault on the part of one or both servants led to their sudden retirement, and I became head cook as well as governess and nurse. On the whole, I think I shall not try to live by cooking, if other trades fail; I don't mind boiling and frying, and making pie-crust is rather pleasant, but I do object to lifting saucepans and blistering my hands over heavy kettles. There is a certain charm in making a stew, especially to the unaccustomed cook, because of the excitement of wondering what the result of such

4 This is the first mention of Sir George Jessel (1824-83), Master of the Rolls (recording officer of one of the supreme courts), who presided over the 1878 trial for custody of Mabel that forms the subject of the climactic section of *Sketches*. The *Dictionary of National Biography* notes, "His mind once made up he became rather impatient of argument, and was sometimes unduly brusque in manner.... His judgments...were rarely appealed from and still more rarely reversed."

various ingredients will be, and whether any flavor save that of onions will survive the competition in the mixture. On the whole my services as cook were voted very successful; I did my cooking better than I did my sweeping: the latter was a failure from sheer want of muscular strength.

This curious episode came to an end abruptly. One of my little pupils fell ill with diphtheria,⁵ and I was transformed from cook into sick-nurse. I sent my Mabel off promptly to her dear grandmother's care, and gave myself up to my old delight in nursing. But it is a horrible disease, diphtheria, and the suffering of the patient is frightful to witness. I shall never forget the poor little girl's black parched lips and gasping breath. Scarcely was she convalescent, when the youngest boy, a fine, strong, healthy little fellow, sickened with scarlet fever.⁶ We elders held a consultation, and decided to isolate the top floor from the rest of the house, and to nurse the little lad there; it seemed almost hopeless to prevent such a disease from spreading through a family of children, but our vigorous measures were successful, and none other suffered. I was voted to the post of nurse, and installed myself promptly, taking up the carpets, turning out the curtains, and across the doorways hanging sheets which I kept always wet with chloride of lime. My meals were brought upstairs and put on the landing outside; my patient and I remained completely isolated, until the disease had run its course; and when all risk was over, I proudly handed over my charge, the disease touching no other member of the flock.

It was a strange time, those weeks of the autumn and early winter in Mr. Woodward's house. He was a remarkably good man, very religious and to a very remarkable extent not "of this world". A "priest" to the tips of his finger-nails, and looking on his priestly office as the highest a man could fill, he yet held it always as one which put him at the service of the poorest who needed help. He was very good to me, and, while deeply lamenting my "perversion", held, by some strange unpriestlike charity, that my "unbelief" was but a passing cloud, sent as trial by "the

5 Diphtheria is an acute, highly contagious disease chiefly found in young children; caused by a bacterium, it is marked by severe swelling of the throat and inflammation of the internal organs and nervous system.

6 Scarlet fever is another acute, highly contagious disease, which is marked by a high fever and inflammation of the nose, throat, and mouth, as well as a generalized toxemia and rash; it is caused by a hemolytic streptococcus.

Lord", and soon to vanish again, leaving me in the "sunshine of faith". He marvelled much, I learned afterwards, where I gained my readiness to work heartily for others, and to remain serenely content amid the roughnesses of my toiling life. To my great amusement I heard later that his elder daughters, trained in strictest observance of all Church ceremonies, had much discussed my non-attendance at the Sacrament, and had finally arrived at the conclusion that I had committed some deadly sin, for which the humble work which I undertook at their house was the appointed penance, and that I was excluded from "the Blessed Sacrament" until the penance was completed!

Very shortly after the illness above-mentioned, my mother went up to town, whither I was soon to follow her, for now the spring had arrived, and it was time to prepare our new home. How eagerly we had looked forward to taking possession; how we had talked over our life together and knitted on the new one we anticipated to the old one we remembered; how we had planned out Mabel's training and arranged the duties that should fall to the share of each! Day-dreams, that never were to be realised!

But a brief space had passed since my mother's arrival in town, when I received a telegram from my brother, stating that she was dangerously ill, and summoning me at once to her bedside. As swiftly as express train could carry me to London I was there, and found my darling in bed, prostrate, the doctor only giving her three days to live. One moment's sight I caught of her face, drawn and haggard; then as she saw me it all changed into delight; "At last! now I can rest."

The brave spirit had at length broken down, never again to rise; the action of her heart had failed, the valves no longer performed their duty, and the bluish shade of forehead and neck told that the blood was no longer sent pure and vivifying through the arteries. But her death was not as near as the doctor had feared; "I do not think she can live four-and-twenty hours," he said to me, after I had been with her for two days. I told her his verdict but it moved her little; "I do not feel that I am going to die just yet," she said resolutely, and she was right. There was an attack of fearful prostration, a very wrestling with death, and then the grim shadow drew backwards, and she struggled back to life. Soon, as is usual in cases of such disease, dropsy⁷ intervened, with all its

7 Dropsy refers to a state of edema, an abnormal accumulation of fluid in the connective tissue causing puffy swelling and the compression that is usually associated with impaired circulation.

weariness of discomfort, and for week after week her long martyrdom dragged on. I nursed her night and day, with a very desperation of tenderness, for now fate had touched the thing that was dearest to me in life. A second horrible crisis came, and for the second time her tenacity and my love beat back the death-stroke. She did not wish to die—the love of life was strong in her; I would not let her die; between us we kept the foe at bay.

At this period, after eighteen months of abstention, and for the last time, I took the Sacrament. This statement will seem strange to my readers, but the matter happened in this wise:

My dear mother had an intense longing to take it, but absolutely refused to do so unless I partook of it with her. "If it be necessary to salvation," she persisted doggedly, "I will not take it if darling Annie is to be shut out. I would rather be lost with her than saved without her." In vain I urged that I could not take it without telling the officiating clergyman of my heresy, and that under such circumstances the clergyman would be sure to refuse to administer to me. She insisted that she could not die happy if she did not take it with me. I went to a clergyman I knew well, and laid the case before him; as I expected, he refused to allow me to communicate. I tried a second; the result was the same. I was in despair; to me the service was foolish and superstitious, but I would have done a great deal more for my mother than eat bread and drink wine, provided that the eating and drinking did not, by pretence of faith on my part, soil my honesty. At last a thought struck me; there was Dean Stanley, my mother's favorite, a man known to be of the broadest school within the Church of England; suppose I asked him? I did not know him, though as a young child I had known his sister as my mother's friend,⁸ and I felt the request would be something of an impertinence. Yet there was just the chance that he might consent, and then my darling's deathbed would be the easier. I told no one, but set out resolutely for the Deanery, Westminster, timidly asked for the Dean, and followed the servant upstairs with a very sinking heart. I was left for a moment alone in the library, and then the Dean came in. I don't think I ever in my life felt more intensely uncomfortable

8 Dean Stanley's sister was Emily Wood's good friend Catherine Vaughan, wife of the Headmaster of Harrow; Taylor finds AB's reticence on this relationship and the Dean's close acquaintance with her father's cousin, Lord Hatherley, disingenuous. Stanley's willingness to administer the sacrament to a non-believer would have been detrimental to his reputation, but AB is revealing the incident three years after his death.

than I did in that minute's interval, as he stood waiting for me to speak, his clear, grave, piercing eyes gazing right into mine.

Very falteringly I preferred my request, stating baldly that I was not a believer in Christ, that my mother was dying, that she was fretting to take the Sacrament, that she would not take it unless I took it with her, that two clergymen had refused to allow me to take part in the service, that I had come to him in despair, feeling how great was the intrusion, but—she was dying.

"You were quite right to come to me," he said as I concluded, in that soft musical voice of his, his keen gaze having changed into one no less direct, but marvellously gentle: "of course, I will go and see your mother, and I have little doubt that if you will not mind talking over your position with me, we may see our way clear to doing as your mother wishes."

I could barely speak my thanks, so much did the kindly sympathy move me; the revulsion from the anxiety and fear of rebuff was strong enough to be almost pain. But Dean Stanley did more than I asked. He suggested that he should call that afternoon, and have a quiet chat with my mother, and then come again on the following day to administer the Sacrament.

"A stranger's presence is always trying to a sick person," he said, with rare delicacy of thought; "and joined to the excitement of the service it might be too much for your dear mother. If I spend half-an-hour with her to-day, and administer the Sacrament to-morrow, it will, I think, be better for her."

So Dean Stanley came that afternoon, and remained talking with my mother for about half-an-hour, and then set himself to understand my own position. He finally told me that conduct was far more important than theory, and that he regarded all as "Christians" who recognised and tried to follow the moral law. On the question of the absolute Deity of Jesus he laid but little stress; Jesus was, "in a special sense", the "Son of God", but it was folly to jangle about words with only human meanings when dealing with the mysteries of divine existence, and above all it was folly to make such words into dividing lines between earnest souls. The one important matter was the recognition of "duty to God and man", and all who were one in that recognition might rightfully join in an act of worship, the essence of which was not acceptance of dogma, but love of God and self-sacrifice for man. "The Holy Communion", he said, in his soft tones, "was never meant to divide from each other hearts that are searching after the one true God; it was meant by its founder as a symbol of unity, not of strife".

On the following day he came again, and celebrated the "Holy Communion" by the bedside of my dear mother. Well was I repaid for the struggle it had cost me to ask so great a kindness from a stranger, when I saw the comfort that gentle noble heart had given to my mother. He soothed away all her anxiety about my heresy with tactful wisdom, bidding her have no fear of differences of opinion where the heart was set on truth. "Remember", she told me he had said to her, "remember that our God is the God of truth, and that therefore the honest search for truth can never be displeasing in his eyes".

Once again after that he came, and after his visit to my mother we had another long talk. I ventured to ask him, the conversation having turned that way, how, with views, so broad as his own, he found it possible to remain in communion with the Church of England. "I think", he said gently, "that I am of more service to true religion by remaining in the Church and striving to widen its boundaries from within, than if I left it and worked from without". And he went on to explain how, as Dean of Westminster, he was in a rarely independent position, and could make the Abbey of a wider national service than would otherwise be possible. In all he said on this his love for and his pride in the glorious Abbey were manifest, and it was easy to see that old historical associations, love of music, of painting, and of stately architecture, were the bonds that held him bound to the "old historic Church of England". His emotions, not his intellect, kept him Churchman, and he shrunk with the over-sensitiveness of the cultured scholar from the idea of allowing the old traditions to be handled roughly by inartistic hands. Naturally of a refined and delicate nature, he had been rendered yet more sensitive by the training of the college and the court; the exquisite courtesy of his manners was but the high polish of a naturally gentle and artistic spirit, a spirit whose gentleness sometimes veiled its strength. I have often heard Dean Stanley harshly spoken of, I have heard his honesty roughly challenged, but never in my presence has he been attacked that I have not uttered my protest against the injustice done him, and thus striven to repay some small fraction of that great debt of gratitude which I shall owe to his memory as long as I live.

As the spring grew warmer, my mother rallied wonderfully, and we began to dare to hope. At last it was decided to move her down to Norwood; she was wearying for change, and it was thought that the purer air of the country might aid the system to recover tone and strength. The furniture was waiting for me to

send for it, and it was soon conveyed to Colby Road; it only furnished two rooms, but I could easily sleep on the floor, and I made the two rooms on the ground floor into bedroom and sittingroom for my dear invalid. One little servant-maid⁹ was all our slender resources could afford, and a very charming one was found for me by Mrs. Scott. Through the months of hard work and poor living that followed, Mary was the most thoughtful and most generous of comrades. And, indeed, I have been very fortunate in my servants, always finding in them willingness to help, and freely-rendered, ungrudging kindness.

I have just said that I could only furnish two rooms, but on my next visit to complete all the arrangements for my mother's reception, I found the bedroom that was to be mine neatly and prettily furnished. The good fairy was Mrs. Scott, who, learning the "nakedness of the land" from Mary, had determined that I should not be as uncomfortable as I had expected.

It was the beginning of May, and the air was soft and bright and warm. We hired an invalid carriage and drove slowly down to Norwood. My mother seemed to enjoy the drive, and when we lifted her into the bright cosy room prepared for her, she was delighted with the change. On the following morning the improvement was continued, but in the evening she was taken suddenly worse, and we lifted her into bed and telegraphed for the doctor. But now the end had come; her strength completely failed, and she felt that death was upon her; but selfless to the last, her only fear was for me. "I am leaving you alone," she would sigh from time to time, and truly I felt, with an anguish I dared not realise, that when she died I should indeed be alone on earth.

For two days longer she was with me, and, miser with my last few hours, I never left her side for five minutes. At last on the 10th of May the weakness passed into delirium, but even then the faithful eyes followed me about the room, until at length they closed for ever, and as the sun sank low in the heavens, the breath came slower and slower, till the silence of death came down upon us and she was gone.

All that followed was like a dream. I would have none touch my dead save myself and her favorite sister, who was with us at the last; she wept over her, but I could not, not even when they

9 It may seem strange that AB should talk about her poverty and yet have a servant-maid, but at this time in Britain even some of the poorest families could still afford one servant, who would perform a great variety of supplemental tasks.

hid her beneath the coffin-lid, nor all that weary way to Kensal Green, whither we took her to lay her with her husband and her baby-son. I could not believe that our day-dream was dead and buried, and the home destroyed ere it was fairly made. My "house was left unto" me "desolate", and the rooms filled with sunshine, but unlighted by her presence, seemed to reiterate to me: "You are all alone".¹⁰

XI.

The two months after my mother's death were the dreariest my life has known, and they were months of tolerably hard struggle. The little house in Colby Road taxed my slender resources heavily, and the search for work was not yet successful. I do not know how I should have managed but for the help, ever at hand, of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Scott. During this time I wrote for Mr. Scott pamphlets on Inspiration, Atonement, Mediation and Salvation, Eternal Torture, Religious Education of Children, Natural *v.* Revealed Religion, and the few guineas thus earned were very valuable.¹ Their house, too, was always open to me, and this was no small help, for often in those days the little money I had was enough to buy food for two but not enough to buy it for three, and I would go out and study all day at the British Museum,² so as to "have my dinner in town", the said dinner being conspicuous by its absence. If I was away for two evenings running from the hospitable house in the terrace, Mrs. Scott would come down to see what had happened, and many a time the supper there was of real physical value to me. Well might I write, in 1879, when Thomas Scott lay dead: "It was Thomas Scott whose house was open to me when my need was sorest, and he never knew, this

10 This is a paraphrasing of Christ's words to the Pharisees, "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" (Matthew 23:38; Luke 13:35); the verse in Luke continues, "Ye shall not see me until the time is come when ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord."

1 Unlike her first two pamphlets, these were signed A. Besant or Annie Besant, and she now declared herself a theist.

2 The Reading Room of the British Library, located in London's British Museum, was renowned as the primary scholarly resource for those who were not otherwise affiliated with one of the university libraries; as one major example, Karl Marx conducted most of his research for *Das Kapital* (1867) there.

generous noble heart, how sometimes, when I went in, weary and overdone, from a long day's study in the British Museum, with scarce food to struggle through the day—he never knew how his genial ‘Well, little lady’, in welcoming tone, cheered the then utter loneliness of my life. To no living man or woman—save one³—do I owe the debt of gratitude that I owe to Thomas Scott.”

The small amount of jewellery I possessed, and all my superfluous clothes, were turned into more necessary articles, and the child, at least, never suffered a solitary touch of want. Mary was a wonderful contriver, and kept house on the very slenderest funds that could be put into a servant's hands, and she also made the little place so bright and fresh-looking that it was always a pleasure to go into it. Recalling those days of “hard living”, I can now look on them without regret. More, I am glad to have passed through them, for they have taught me how to sympathise with those who are struggling as I struggled then, and I never can hear the words fall from pale lips: “I am hungry”, without remembering how painful a thing hunger is, and without curing that pain, at least for the moment.

But I turn from this to the brighter side of my life, the intellectual and social side, where I found a delight unknown in the old days of bondage. First, there was the joy of freedom, the joy of speaking out frankly and honestly each thought. Truly, I had the right to say: “With a great price obtained I this freedom,” and having paid the price, I revelled in the liberty I had bought. Mr. Scott's valuable library⁴ was at my service; his keen brain challenged my opinions, probed my assertions, and suggested phases of thought hitherto untouched. I studied harder than ever, and the study now was unchecked by any fear of possible consequences. I had nothing left of the old faith save belief in “a God”, and that began slowly to melt away. The Theistic axiom: “If there be a God at all he must be at least as good as his highest creature”, began with an “if”, and to that “if” I turned my attention. “Of all impossible things”, writes Miss Frances Power Cobbe, “the most impossible must surely be that a man should dream

3 “Save one” is undoubtedly a reference to Bradlaugh.

4 Scott's “valuable library” proved to be another important resource for AB, much as Leslie Stephen's was for his daughter, Virginia Woolf, who refers in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) to the education such collections provide for herself and other non-university women who are, however, “daughters of educated men.”

something of the good and the noble, and that it should prove at last that his Creator was less good and less noble than he had dreamed.”⁵ But, I questioned, are we sure that there is a Creator? Granted that, if there is, he must be above his highest creature, but—is there such a being? “The ground”, says the Rev. Charles Voysey, “on which our belief in God rests is man. Man, parent of Bibles and Churches, inspirer of all good thoughts and good deeds. Man, the master-piece of God’s thought on earth. Man, the text-book of all spiritual knowledge. Neither miraculous nor infallible, man is nevertheless the only trustworthy record of the Divine mind in things pertaining to God. Man’s reason, conscience, and affections are the only true revelation of his Maker.” But what if God were only man’s own image reflected in the mirror of man’s mind? What if man were the creator, not the revelation of his God?

It was inevitable that such thoughts should arise after the more palpably indefensible doctrines of Christianity had been discarded. Once encourage the human mind to think, and bounds to the thinking can never again be set by authority. Once challenge traditional beliefs, and the challenge will ring on every shield which is hanging in the intellectual arena. Around me was the atmosphere of conflict, and, freed from its long repression, my mind leapt up to share in the strife with a joy in the intellectual tumult, the intellectual strain.

At this time I found my way to South Place Chapel,⁶ to which Mr. Moncure D. Conway was attracting many a seeker after truth. I was fortunate enough to be introduced to this remarkable religious leader, and to his charming wife, one of the sweetest and steadiest natures which it has been my lot to meet. It was from Mrs. Conway that I first heard of Mr. Bradlaugh as a speaker that everyone should hear. She asked me one day if I had been to the

5 The quotation looks ahead to Cobbe’s article, “A Faithless World,” published in the *Contemporary Review*, to which AB replied with her own article, “A World without God” (1885). Cobbe was originally provoked by AB’s second lecture, “The True Basis of Morality” (1874); cf. XII.10 and XII.11.

6 South Place Chapel, London, served as a platform for the American Unitarian leader and freethinker Moncure Daniel Conway (1832-1907), who was the author of the Scott pamphlet entitled *The Voysey Case* (1871); besides providing AB with a material and spiritual home base, he was largely responsible for introducing her to Hindu and Buddhist literature through his popular lecture series.

Hall of Science,⁷ and I said, with the stupid, ignorant reflexion of other people's prejudices which is but too common:

"No, I have never been. Mr. Bradlaugh is rather a rough sort of speaker, is he not?"

"He is the finest speaker of Saxon English that I have ever heard," Mrs. Conway answered, "except, perhaps, John Bright, and his power over a crowd is something marvellous. Whether you agree with him or not, you should hear him."

I replied that I really did not know what his views were, beyond having a vague notion that he was an Atheist of a rather pronounced type, but that I would go and hear him when I had an opportunity.

Mr. Conway had passed beyond the emotional Theism of Mr. Voysey, and talk with him did something towards widening my views on the question of a Divine Existence. I re-read carefully Mansel's Bampton Lectures, and found in them much to provoke doubt, nothing to induce faith. Take the following phrases, and think whither they carry us. Dean Mansel is speaking of God as Infinite, and he says: "That a man can be conscious of the Infinite is, then, a supposition which, in the very terms in which it is expressed, annihilates itself.... The Infinite, if it is to be conceived at all, must be conceived as potentially everything and actually nothing; for if there is anything in general which it cannot become, it is thereby limited; and if there is anything in particular which it actually is, it is thereby excluded from being any other thing. But again, it must also be conceived as actually everything and potentially nothing: for an unrealised potentiality is likewise a limitation. If the infinite can be that which it is not, it is by that very possibility marked out as incomplete and capable of a higher perfection. If it is actually everything, it possesses no characteristic feature by which it can be distinguished from anything else and discerned as an object of consciousness."

Could any argument more thoroughly Atheistic be put before a mind which dared to think out to the logical end any train of thought? Such reasoning can lead but to one of two ends: despair of truth and consequent acceptance of the incomprehensible as Divine, or else the resolute refusal to profess belief where reason

7 The Hall of Science in Old Street was the official meeting place and forum of the Freethinkers who founded the NSS in 1866; AB last spoke from its stage in 1891, when she delivered her autobiographical "fragment" that explained why she became a Theosophist (see Appendix A4).

is helpless, and where faith is but the credulity of ignorance. In my case, it had the latter effect.

At the same time I re-read Mill's "Examination of Sir W. Hamilton's Philosophy", and also went through a pretty severe study of Comte's *Philosophie Positive*.⁸ I had entirely given up the use of prayer, not because I was an Atheist but because I was still a Theist. It seemed to me to be absurd to pray, if I believed in a God who was wiser and better than myself. An all-wise God did not need my suggestions: an all-good God would do all that was best without my prompting. Prayer appeared to me to be a blasphemous impertinence, and for a considerable time I had discontinued its use. But God fades gradually out of the daily life of those who never pray; a God who is not a Providence is a superfluity; when from the heaven does not smile a listening Father, it soon becomes an empty space whence resounds no echo of man's cry.

At last I said to Mr. Scott: "Mr. Scott, may I write a tract on the nature and existence of God?"

He glanced at me keenly: "Ah, little lady; you are facing then that problem at last? I thought it must come. Write away."

The thought that had been driving me forward found its expression in the opening words of the essay published a few months later, with one or two additions that were made after I had read two of Mr. Bradlaugh's essays, his "Plea for Atheism", and "Is there a God?":⁹ "It is impossible for those who study the deeper religious problems of our time to stave off much longer the question which lies at the root of them all, 'What do you

8 Mill's *Examination of Sir W. Hamilton's Philosophy* was published in 1865. Auguste Comte (1798-1857), known as the founder of sociology and Positivism, published his twelve-volume *Philosophie Positive* from 1830 to 1842 (abridged free English translation by Harriet Martineau, 1853). Positivism is a philosophical system that treats theology and metaphysics as part of earlier, imperfect knowledge, in contrast to the positive knowledge obtained from studying natural phenomena and establishing factual information which can be verified by empirical science. AB would write a biography of Comte in 1875 for the Freethought Publishing Company, publisher of *Sketches* in book form.

9 Bradlaugh's essays were published as pamphlets by the Freethought Society, while AB's work, including the essay "On the Nature and Existence of God" (1874), was still being published by Scott; in both their cases, many of the essays were the outgrowth of lectures given on the Freethought circuit.

believe in regard to God?' We may controvert Christian doctrines, one after another; point by point we may be driven from the various beliefs of our churches; reason may force us to see contradictions where we had imagined harmony, and may open our eyes to flaws where we had dreamed of perfection; we resign all idea of a revelation; we seek for God in Nature only: we renounce for ever the hope (which glorified our former creed into such alluring beauty) that at some future time we should verily 'see' God; that 'our eyes should behold the King in his beauty', in that fairy 'land which is very far off'. But every step we take onwards towards a more reasonable faith and a surer light of Truth, leads us nearer and nearer to the problem of problems: 'What is THAT which men call God?'"

I sketched out the plan of my essay and had written most of it when on returning one day from the British Museum I stopped at the shop of Mr. Edward Truelove, 256 High Holborn.¹⁰ I had been working at some Comtist literature, and had found a reference to Mr. Truelove's shop as one at which Comtist publications might be bought. Lying on the counter was a copy of the *National Reformer*, and attracted by the title I bought it. I had never before heard of nor seen the paper, and I read it placidly in the omnibus; looking up, I was at first puzzled and then amused to see an old gentleman gazing at me with indignation and horror printed on his countenance; I realised that my paper had disturbed his peace of mind, and that the sight of a young woman, respectably dressed in crape, reading an Atheistic journal in an omnibus was a shock too great to be endured by the ordinary Philistine without sign of discomposure. He looked so hard at the paper that I was inclined to offer it to him for his perusal, but repressed the mischievous inclinations and read on demurely.

This first copy of the paper with which I was to be so closely connected bore date July 19th, 1874, and contained two long letters from a Mr. Arnold of Northampton, attacking Mr. Bradlaugh, and a brief and singularly self-restrained answer from the

10 Edward Truelove (1809-99), freethinker, Owenite socialist, and champion of male suffrage, was a longtime publisher and bookseller of radical works; publisher of the controversial *Elements of Social Science* (1854) and Robert Dale Owen's *Moral Physiology* (1875)—for which he was imprisoned for four months—he eventually headed the Freethought Publishing Company which became the publishing house for the remainder of AB's publications throughout the period that she wrote the *Sketches*.

latter. There was also an article on the National Secular Society,¹¹ which made me aware that there was an organisation devoted to the propagandism of Free Thought. I felt that if such a society existed, I ought to belong to it, and I consequently wrote a short note to the editor of the *National Reformer*, asking whether it was necessary for a person to profess Atheism before being admitted to the Society. The answer appeared in the *National Reformer*:—

“S.E.¹²—To be a member of the National Secular Society it is only necessary to be able honestly to accept the four principles, as given in the *National Reformer* of June 14th. This any person may do without being required to avow himself an Atheist. Candidly, we can see no logical resting-place between the entire acceptance of authority, as in the Roman Catholic Church, and the most extreme Rationalism.¹³ If, on again looking to the Principles of the Society, you can accept them, we repeat to you our invitation.”

11 For previous commentary on the NSS and Freethought, see notes IV.6, V.19-20, and XI.7.

12 The choice of the initials “S.E.” remains a mystery. The four principles of the society as listed in the *NR* (14 June 1874) are as follows: (1) This Association declares that the Promotion of Human Improvement and Happiness is the highest duty. (2) That the theological teachings of the world have been, and are, most powerfully obstructive of human improvement and happiness; human activity being guided and increased by a consciousness of facts of existence; while it is misguided and impeded in the most mischievous manner when the intellect is warped or prostrated by childish and absurd superstitions. (3) That in order to promote effectually the improvement and happiness of mankind, every individual of the human family ought to be well placed and instructed, and all who are of a suitable age ought to be usefully employed for their own good and the general good. (4) That human improvement and happiness cannot be effectually promoted without civil and religious liberty; and that, therefore, it is the duty of every individual—a duty to be practically recognised by every member of this Association—to actively attack all barriers to equal freedom of thought and utterance for all, upon political and theological subjects (*NR* 23.24, n.s. 735: 377).

13 Rationalism primarily refers to relying on reason as the method for establishing religious truth; in general, it regards appealing to rational over nonrational experience as the basis for problem-solving.

I sent my name in as an active member, and find it recorded in the *National Reformer* of August 9th. Having received an intimation that Londoners could receive their certificates at the Hall of Science from Mr. Bradlaugh on any Sunday evening, I betook myself thither, and it was on the 2nd August, 1874, that I first set foot in a Free-thought hall.

As I sat, much crushed, surveying the crowded audience with much interest and longing to know which were members of the brotherhood I had entered, a sudden roar of cheering startled me. I saw a tall figure passing swiftly along and mounting the stairs, and the roar deepened and swelled as he made a slight acknowledgment of the greeting and sat down. I remember well my sensations as I looked at Charles Bradlaugh for the first time. The grave, quiet, *strong* look, as he sat facing the crowd, impressed me strangely, and most of all was I surprised at the breadth of forehead, the massive head, of the man I had heard described as a mere ignorant demagogue.

The lecture was on "The ancestry and birth of Jesus", and was largely devoted to tracing the resemblance between the Christ and Krishna myths.¹⁴ As this ground was well-known to me, I was able to judge of the lecturer's accuracy, and quickly found that his knowledge was as sound as his language was splendid. I had never before heard eloquence, sarcasm, fire, and passion brought to bear on the Christian superstition, nor had I ever before felt the sway of the orator, nor the power that dwells in spoken words.

After the lecture, Mr. Bradlaugh came down the Hall with some certificates of membership of the National Secular Society in his hand, and glancing round for their claimants caught, I suppose, some look of expectancy in my face, for he paused and handed me mine, with a questioning, "Mrs. Besant?". Then he said that if I had any doubt at all on the subject of Atheism, he would willingly discuss it with me, if I would write making an appointment for that purpose. I made up my mind to take advantage of the opportunity, and a day or two later saw me walking down Commercial Road, looking for Turner Street.

My first conversation with Mr. Bradlaugh was brief, direct, and satisfactory. We found that there was little real difference

¹⁴ Krishna is one of the major sacred figures in the Hindu pantheon; he is the eighth incarnation, or avatar, of the supreme deity Vishnu and a god in his own right, about whom a rich variety of legends has sprung up.

between our theological views, and my dislike of the name "Atheist" arose from my sharing in the vulgar error that the Atheist asserted, "There is no God". This error I corrected in the draft of my essay, by inserting a few passages from pamphlets written by acknowledged Atheists, to which Mr. Bradlaugh drew my attention; with this exception the essay remained as it was sketched, being described by Mr. Bradlaugh as "a very good Atheistic essay", a criticism which ended with the smiling comment: "You have thought yourself into Atheism without knowing it."

Very wise were some of the suggestions made: "You should never say you have an opinion on a subject until you have tried to study the strongest things said against the view to which you are inclined".¹⁵ "You must not think you know a subject until you are acquainted with all that the best minds have said about it." "No steady work can be done in public unless the worker study at home far more than he talks outside." And let me say here that among the many things for which I have to thank Mr. Bradlaugh, there is none for which I owe him more gratitude than for the fashion in which he has constantly urged the duty of all who stand forward as teachers to study deeply every subject they touch, and the impetus he has given to my own love of knowledge by the constant spur of criticism and of challenge, criticism of every weak statement, challenge of every hastily-expressed view. It will be a good thing for the world when a friendship between a man and a woman no longer means protective condescension on one side and helpless dependence on the other, but when they meet on equal ground of intellectual sympathy, discussing, criticisms, studying, and so aiding the evolution of stronger and clearer thought-ability in each.¹⁶

A few days after our first discussion, Mr. Bradlaugh offered me a place on the staff of the *National Reformer* at a small weekly salary; and my first contribution appeared in the number for

15 This advice prefigures Mme. Blavatsky's tactic in drawing AB into Theosophy; as she reports in *An Autobiography*, Blavatsky advised her to read the report about her published by the Society for Psychical Research before joining the Theosophical Society.

16 This plea for equality in a friendship between a man and a woman presages the topic of a novel written by Elizabeth Robins in 1923 entitled *Time Is Whispering*; Robins began but never finished a biography of Besant in the 1930s (see her papers at the Fales Library, New York University).

August 30th, over the signature of “Ajax”. I was obliged to use a *nom de guerre*¹⁷ at first, for the work I was doing for Mr. Scott would have been injured had my name appeared in the columns of the terrible *National Reformer*, and until the work commenced and paid for was concluded I did not feel at liberty to use my own name. Later, I signed my *National Reformer* articles, and the tracts written for Mr. Scott appeared anonymously.

The name was suggested by the famous statue of “Ajax crying for light”, a cast of which stands in the centre walk of the Crystal Palace.¹⁸ The cry through the darkness for light, even if light brought destruction, was one that awoke the keenest sympathy of response from my heart:

“If our fate be death,
Give light, and let us die!”¹⁹

To see, to know, to understand, even though the seeing blind, though the knowledge sadden, though the understanding shatter the dearest hopes, such has ever been the craving of the upward-striving mind of man. Some regard it as a weakness, as a folly, but I am sure that it exists most strongly in some of the noblest of our race; that from the lips of those who have done most in lifting the burden of ignorance from the overstrained and bowed shoulders of a stumbling world has gone out most often into the empty darkness the pleading, impassioned cry:

“Give light.”

17 A *nom de guerre* is an assumed name—a journalist’s pen-name or pseudonym taken to maintain the writer’s anonymity; Bradlaugh’s had been “The Iconoclast.”

18 Ajax, son of Telamon and leader of the Salaminians at the siege of Troy, is portrayed by Homer in the *Odyssey* as brave to the point of obstinacy; eventually he is driven mad by his own resentment over Odysseus being awarded the armor of Achilles, and he commits suicide. The depiction of “Ajax Crying for the Light” has been taken as an heraldic symbol for the search for truth in the midst of darkness and despair, even if it means being delivered unto one’s enemies; the Crystal Palace had by now been relocated to Sydenham.

19 The quotation comes from Keble’s poetry collection entitled *The Christian Year* (1827). This particular poem is intended for recitation on the sixth Sunday after Epiphany and was written in response to John 3:2; those seeking ease from “doubt’s galling chain” now hold forth: “‘Only disperse the cloud,’ they cry,/ ‘And if our fate be death, give light and let us die’” (ll. 7-8).

XII.

My first lecture was delivered at the Co-operative Society's Hall, 55, Castle Street, on August 20th, 1874.¹ Twice before this, I had ventured to raise my voice in discussion, once at a garden-party at which I was invited to join in a brief informal debate, and discovered that words came readily and smoothly, and the second time at the Liberal Social Union, in a discussion on a paper read by a member—I forget by whom—dealing with the opening of Museums and Art Galleries on Sunday.²

My membership of that same "Liberal" Social Union was not, by the way, of very long duration. A discussion arose, one night, on the admissibility of Atheists to the society. Dr. Zerffi declared that he would not remain a member if avowed Atheists were admitted. I declared that I was an Atheist, and that the basis of the Union was liberty. The result was that I found myself cold-shouldered, and those who had been warmly cordial to me as a Theist looked askance at me after I had avowed that my scepticism had advanced beyond their "limits of religious thought". The Liberal Social Union knew me no more, but in the wider field of work open before me the narrowmindedness of this petty clique troubled me not at all.

To return from this digression to my first essay in lecturing work. An invitation to read a paper before the Co-operative Society came to me from Mr. Greenwood, who was, I believe, the Secretary, and as the subject was left to my own choice, I deter-

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- 1 The Co-operative Society originated in 1795 with a mill co-operative built by some of the poor inhabitants of Hull, which was followed by the 1863 formation of the London Association for the Promotion of Co-operation; the society sought to construct a series of warehouses that could supply the needs of working-class families in the greater London area. Freethinkers were prominent in the Co-operative movement.
 - 2 The Liberal Social Union espoused an economic system constituting a compromise between Socialism and free enterprise, one in which businesses are publicly owned but production is determined by the market, not controlled by state planning. Sunday closure of museums and art galleries reflects the doctrine of Christians who believe that the Sabbath should be observed according to the Fourth Commandment, which forbids work on that day; Sabbatarianism in the British Isles dates back to John Knox and the Scottish Presbyterians, and although Sunday observance laws have been reduced, many of these "blue laws" are still in effect there today.

mined that my first public attempt at speech should be on behalf of my own sex, and selected for it, "The Political Status of Women".³ With much fear and trembling was that paper written, and it was a very nervous person who presented herself at the Co-operative Hall. When a visit to the dentist is made, and one stands on the steps outside, desiring to run away ere the neat little boy in buttons opens the door and beams on one with a smile of compassionate contempt and implike triumph, then the world seems dark and life is as a huge blunder. But all such feelings are poor and weak when compared with the sinking of the heart, and the trembling of the knees, which seize upon the unhappy lecturer as he advances towards his first audience, and as before his eyes rises a ghastly vision of a tongue-tied would-be speaker facing rows of listening faces, listening to—silence.

All this miserable feeling, however, disappeared the moment I rose to my feet and looked at the faces before me. No tremor of nervousness touched me from the first word to the last. And a similar experience has been mine ever since. I am still always nervous before a lecture, and feel miserable and ill-assured, but, once on my feet, I am at my ease, and not once on the platform after the lecture has commenced have I experienced the painful feeling of hesitancy and "fear of the sound of my own voice" of which I have often heard people speak.

The death of Mr. Charles Gilpin in September left vacant one of the seats for Northampton, and Mr. Bradlaugh at once announced his intention of again presenting himself to the constituency as a candidate. He had at first stood for the borough in 1868, and had received 1086 votes; on February 5th, 1874, he received 1653 votes, and of these 1060 were plumpers;⁴ the other candidates were Messrs. Merewether, Phipps, Gilpin, and Lord Henley; Mr. Merewether had 12 plumpers; Mr. Phipps, 113, Mr. Gilpin, 64; Lord Henley, 21. Thus signs were already seen of the

3 "The Political Status of Women" was quickly printed in the *NR* and subsequently as a pamphlet, and it was still in reprint by Watts in 1885, the year *Sketches* was published in book form; Bradlaugh's daughter Hypatia later reported that her father considered this "probably the best speech by a woman" he had ever heard (Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh*, II, 15-16); for the full text of the pamphlet, see Appendix D1.

4 A plumper is a vote given to one candidate only when the voter might vote for more than one for the same office.

compact and personally loyal following which was to win the seat for its chief in 1880, after twelve years of steady struggle. In 1868, Mr. John Stuart Mill⁵ had strongly supported Mr. Bradlaugh's candidature, and had sent a donation to his election fund. Mr. Mill wrote in his *Autobiography* (pp. 311, 312):

"He had the support of the working classes; having heard him speak I knew him to be a man of ability, and he had proved that he was the reverse of a demagogue by placing himself in strong opposition to the prevailing opinion of the Democratic party on two such important subjects as Malthusianism and Personal Representation.⁶ Men of this sort, who, while sharing the democratic feelings of the working classes, judge political questions for themselves, and have courage to assert their individual convictions against popular opposition, were needed, as it seemed to me, in Parliament; and I did not think that Mr. Bradlaugh's anti-religious opinions (even though he had been intemperate in the expression of them) ought to exclude him."

When the election was over, and after Mr. Mill had himself been beaten at Westminster, he wrote, referring to his donation: "It was the right thing to do, and if the election were yet to take place, I would do it again". The election in February, 1874, took place while Mr. Bradlaugh was away in America, and this second one in the same year took place on the eve of his departure on another American lecturing tour.

I went down to Northampton to report electioneering incidents for the *National Reformer*, and spent some days there in the whirl of the struggle. The Whig party was more bitter against Mr.

5 For Mill, see note VI.15.

6 A demagogue, sometimes called a rabble-rouser, is someone who tries to gain personal advantage by specious or extravagant claims or promises; the Democratic party is invoked to signal those who favor government by the people; Malthusianism, derived from the theories of the British economist Thomas Robert Malthus (1766-1834), holds that population tends to increase faster than its requisite subsistence, and rather than relying on disease, war, and famine, it advocates preventative checks, such as moral restraint; and Personal (or Proportional, as AB calls it in *An Autobiography*) Representation is an electoral system designed to represent each political group in proportion to its actual voting strength in a community.

Bradlaugh than was the Tory, and every weapon that could be forged out of slander and falsehood was used against him by "Liberals", who employed their Christianity as an electioneering dodge to injure a man whose sturdy Radicalism they feared. Over and over again Mr. Bradlaugh was told that he was an "impossible candidate", and gibe and sneer and scoff were flung at the man who had neither ancestors nor wealth to recommend him, who fought his battle with his brain and his tongue, and whose election expenses were paid by hundreds of contributions from poor men and women in every part of the land. Strenuous efforts were made to procure a "Liberal" candidate, who should be able at least to prevent Mr. Bradlaugh's return by obtaining the votes of the Liberal as against the Radical party. Messrs. Bell and James and Dr. Pearce came on the scene only to disappear. Mr. Jacob Bright and Mr. Arthur Arnold were suggested. Mr. Ayrton's name was whispered. Major Lumley was recommended by Mr. Bernal Osborne. Dr. Kenealy proclaimed himself ready to rescue the Liberal party in their dire strait. Mr. Tillet of Norwich, Mr. Cox of Belper, were invited, but neither of these would consent to oppose a sound Radical, who had fought two elections at Northampton and who had been before the constituency for six years. At last Mr. William Fowler, a banker, was invited, and accepted the task of handing over the representation of a Radical borough to a Tory.

October 6th was fixed as the election day, and at 7.30 on that day Mr. Merewether, the Tory, was declared elected with 2,171 votes. Mr. Bradlaugh polled 1,766, having added another 133 voters to those who had polled for him in the previous February.

The violent abuse levelled against Mr. Bradlaugh by the Whigs, and the foul and wicked slanders circulated against him, had angered almost to madness those who knew and loved him, and when it was found that the unscrupulous Whig devices had succeeded in turning the election against him, the fury broke out into open violence. As Mr. Bradlaugh was sitting well-nigh exhausted in the hotel, the landlord rushed in, crying to him to go out and try to stop the people, or there would be murder done at the "Palmerston", Mr. Fowler's head-quarters; the crowd was charging the door, and the windows were being broken with showers of stones. Weary as he was, Mr. Bradlaugh sprang to his feet and swiftly made his way to the rescue of those who had defeated him. Flinging himself before the door, he drove the crowd back, scolded them into quietness and dispersed them. But at nine o'clock he had to leave the town to

catch the mail⁷ for Queenstown, where he was to join the steamer for America, and after he had left, the riot he had quelled broke out afresh. The soldiers, were called out, the Riot Act⁸ was read, stones flew freely, heads and windows were broken, but no very serious harm was done. The “Palmerston” and the printing office of the *Mercury*, the Whig organ, were the principal sufferers, windows and doors vanishing somewhat completely.

In this same month of October I find I noted in the *National Reformer* that it was rumored “that on hearing that the Prince of Wales had succeeded the Earl of Ripon as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of England,⁹ Mr. Bradlaugh immediately sent in his resignation”. “The report”, I added demurely, “seems likely to be a true one”. I had not much doubt of the fact, having seen the cancelled certificate.

My second lecture was delivered on September 27th, during the election struggle, at Mr. Moncure D. Conway’s Chapel in St. Paul’s Road, Camden Town, and was on “The true basis of morality”. The lecture was re-delivered a few weeks later at a Unitarian chapel,¹⁰ where the minister was the Rev. Peter Dean, and gave, I was afterwards told, great offence to some of the congregation, especially to Miss Frances Power Cobbe, who declared that she would have left the chapel had not the speaker been a

7 “To catch the mail” refers to travelling by the mail (or post) coach, which was drawn by four horses and had room for four passengers. Beginning in 1784, this mail delivery system provided faster transport than regular coaches in Britain, as it stopped only for mail service. By the mid-nineteenth century, mail coaches were starting to be replaced by the expanding railway network.

8 The Riot Act is a British law instituted for dispersing gatherings that disturbed the peace; to read the riot act is to issue a serious reprimand or warning.

9 The Prince of Wales, Edward Albert (1841-1910), was the future King of England, Edward VII. The Grand Lodge of England is the governing body of the secret fraternal society of Freemasonry in England, Wales, and the Channel Islands; officially organized in 1717, its two main lodges were consolidated in 1813 into one, headed by a single Grand Master.

10 The Unitarian Church is a Christian denomination that believes that the deity is one being and generally affirms individual freedom, religious tolerance, and a united world community; its heritage can be traced to certain unorthodox views in the early church and Reformation period. For more on Cobbe, see note VII.22 and XI.5.

woman. The ground of complaint was that the suggested “basis” was Utilitarian and human instead of Intuitionist and Theistic.¹¹ Published as a pamphlet, the lecture has reached its seventh thousand.

In October I had a severe attack of congestion of the lungs, and soon after my recovery I left Norwood to settle in London. I found that my work required that I should be nearer head-quarters, and I arranged to rent part of a house—19, Westbourne Park Terrace, Bayswater—two lady friends taking the remainder. The arrangement proved a very comfortable one, and it continued until my improved means enabled me, in 1876, to take a house of my own.

In January, 1875, I made up my mind to lecture regularly, and in the *National Reformer* for January 17th I find the announcement that “Mrs. Annie Besant (Ajax) will lecture at South Place Chapel, Finsbury, on ‘Civil and religious liberty’”. Mr. Conway took the chair at this first identification of “Ajax” with myself, and sent a very kindly notice of the lecture to the *Cincinnati Commercial*. Mr. Charles Watts¹² wrote a report in the *National Reformer* of January 24th. Dr. Maurice Davies¹³ also wrote a very favorable article in a London journal, but unfortunately he knew Mr. Walter Besant, who persuaded him to suppress my name, so that although the notice appeared it did me no service. My struggle to gain my livelihood was for some time rendered considerably more difficult by this kind of ungenerous and underhand antagonism. A woman’s road to the earning of her own living, especially when she is weighted with the care of a young child, is always fairly thorny at the outset, and does not need to be ren-

11 Utilitarian refers back to the doctrine of Utilitarianism, which states that the useful is good and that conduct should be judged on the usefulness of its consequences; as a theory, it was developed and summed up by political economist Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and philosopher-historian James Mill (1773-1836)—father of John Stuart Mill—as “the greatest good for the greatest number.” In contrast, Intuitionist relates to the ethical system that decrees that the rightness or wrongness of action is immediately knowable by an innate faculty, also known as a conscience.

12 Charles Watts (1836-1906), Bristol bookseller-publisher and secretary of the NSS, revealed AB’s “Ajax” identity, with her permission, in his “Notes” column of the *NR* for 19 January 1875.

13 Dr. Charles Maurice Davies (1828-1910), unorthodox London minister turned journalist, was the author of a series of sensational novels.

dered yet more difficult by secret attempts to injure, on the part of those who trust that suffering and poverty may avail to bend pride to submission.

My next lecture was given in the Theatre Royal, Northampton, and in the *National Reformer* of February 14th appears for the first time my list of lecturing engagements, so that in February next I shall complete my first decade of lecturing for the Freethought and Republican Cause.¹⁴ Never, since first I stood on the Freethought platform, have I felt one hour's regret for the resolution taken in solitude in January, 1875, to devote to that sacred Cause every power of brain and tongue that I possessed. Not lightly was that resolution taken, for I know no task of weightier responsibility than that of standing forth as teacher, and swaying thousands of hearers year after year. But I pledged my word then to the Cause I loved that no effort on my part should be wanting to render myself worthy of the privilege of service which I took; that I would read, and study, and would train every faculty that I had; that I would polish my language, discipline my thought, widen my knowledge; and this, at least, I may say, that if I have written and spoken much I have studied and thought more, and that at least I have not given to my mistress, Liberty, that "which hath cost me nothing".

A queer incident occurred on February 17th. I had been invited by the Dialectical Society¹⁵ to read a paper, and selected for subject "The existence of God". The Dialectical Society had for some years held their meetings in a room in Adam Street rented from the Social Science Association. When the members gathered as usual on this 17th February, the door was found closed, and they were informed that Ajax's paper had been too much for the Social Science nerves, and that entrance to the ordinary meeting-place was henceforth denied. We found refuge in the Charing Cross Hotel, where we speculated merrily on the eccentricities of religious charity.

14 The Republican Cause here generally refers to attachment to the republican principles in which the supreme power of government resides in a voting citizenry whose elected officials are responsible to them according to law.

15 The Dialectical Society, established in 1868 (Bradlaugh was a founding member), was one of the most prestigious debate forums of the period; its prospectus directed its members to examine all evidence before believing in anything, and it was atypical in allowing women to participate in its deliberations.

On February 12th, I started on my first lecturing tour in the provinces. After lecturing at Birkenhead on the evening of that day, I started by the night mail for Glasgow. Some races—dog races, I think—had been going on, and very unpleasant were many of the passengers waiting on the platform. Some Birkenhead friends had secured me a compartment, and watched over me till the train began to move. Then, after we had fairly started, the door was flung open by a porter and a man was thrust in who half tumbled on to the seat. As he slowly recovered, he stood up, and as his money rolled out of his hand on to the floor and he gazed vaguely at it, I saw, to my horror, that he was drunk. The position was [not] pleasant, for the train was an express and was not timed to stop for a considerable time. My odious fellow-passenger spent some time on the floor hunting for his scattered coins. Then he slowly gathered himself up, and presently became conscious of my presence. He studied me for some time and then proposed to shut the window. I assented quietly, not wanting to discuss a trifle, and feeling in deadly terror. Alone at night in an express, with a man not drunk enough to be helpless but too drunk to be controlled. Never, before or since, have I felt so thoroughly frightened, but I sat there quiet and unmoved, only grasping a penknife in my pocket, with a desperate resolve to use my feeble weapon as soon as the need arose. The man had risen again to his feet and had come over to me, when a jarring noise was heard and the train began to slacken.

“What is that?” stammered my drunken companion.

“They are putting on the brakes to stop the train,” I said very slowly and distinctly, though a very passion of relief made it hard to say quietly the measured words.

The man sat down stupidly, staring at me, and in a minute or two more the train pulled up at a station. It had been stopped by signal. In a moment I was at the window, calling the guard. I rapidly explained to him that I was travelling alone, that a half-drunken man was with me, and I begged him to put me into another carriage. With the usual kindness of a railway official, the guard at once moved my baggage and myself into an empty compartment, into which he locked me, and he kept a friendly watch over me at every station at which we stopped until he landed me safely at Glasgow.

At Glasgow a room had been taken for me at a Temperance Hotel,¹⁶ and it seemed to me a new and lonely sort of thing to be

16 Temperance Hotels followed the guidelines of Temperance Societies in expecting their patrons to abstain from intoxicating drink.

“on my own account” in a strange city in a strange hotel. By the way, why are Temperance Hotels so often lacking in cleanliness? Surely abstinence from wine and superfluity of “matter in the wrong place” need not necessarily be correlated in hotel-life, and yet my experience leads me to look for the twain together. Here and there I have been to Temperance Hotels in which water is used for other purposes than that of drinking, but these are, I regret to say, the exceptions to a melancholy rule.

From Glasgow I went north to Aberdeen, and from Aberdeen home again to London. A long weary journey that was, in a third-class carriage in the cold month of February, but the labor had in it a joy that outpaid all physical discomfort, and the feeling that I had found my work in the world gave a new happiness to my life.

I reported my doings to the chief of our party in America, and found them only half approved. “You should have waited till I returned, and at least I could have saved you some discomforts,” he wrote; but the discomforts troubled me little, and I think I rather preferred the independent launch out into lecturing work, trusting only to my own courage and ability to win my way. So far as health was concerned, the lecturing acted as a tonic. My chest had always been a little delicate, and when I consulted a doctor on the possibility of my lecturing he answered: “It will either kill you or cure you”. It has entirely cured the lung weakness, and I have grown strong and vigorous instead of being frail and delicate as of old.

On February 28th I delivered my first lecture at the Hall of Science, London, and was received with that warmth of greeting which Freethinkers are ever willing to extend to one who sacrifices aught to join their ranks. From that day to this that hearty welcome at our central London hall has never failed me, and the love and courage wherewith Freethinkers have ever stood by me have overpaid a thousandfold any poor services I have been fortunate enough to render to the common cause.¹⁷

It would be wearisome to go step by step over the ten years’ journeys and lectures, I will only select, here and there, incidents illustrative of the whole.

17 Circumstances had changed by the time AB had converted to Theosophy and continued to try to address audiences at the Hall of Science. Her lecture “1875-1891: A Fragment of Autobiography” was delivered to this forum as a farewell speech, since she would henceforth not be allowed to speak about her current belief system; see Appendix A4.

Some folk say that the lives of Freethought lecturers are easy, and that their lecturing tours are lucrative in the extreme. On one occasion I spent eight days in the north lecturing daily, with three lectures on the two Sundays, and made a deficit of 11s. on the journey! I do not pretend that such a thing would happen now, but I fancy that every Freethought lecturer could tell of a similar experience in the early days of “winning his way”.

There is no better field for Freethought and Radical work than Northumberland and Durham; the miners there are as a rule shrewd and hard-headed men, and very cordial is the greeting given by them to those whom they have reason to trust. At Seghill and at Bedlington I have slept in their cottages and have been welcomed to their tables, and I remember one evening at Seghill, after a lecture, that my host invited about a dozen miners to supper to meet me; the talk ran on politics, and I soon found that my companions knew more of English politics and had a far shrewder notion of political methods than I had found among the ordinary “diners-out” in “society”. They were of the “uneducated” class despised by “gentlemen” and had not the vote, but politically they were far better educated than their social superiors, and were far better fitted to discharge the duties of citizenship.

On May 16th I attended, for the first time, the Annual Conference called by the National Secular Society. It was held at Manchester, in the Society’s rooms in Grosvenor Street, and it is interesting and encouraging to note how the Society has grown and strengthened since that small meeting held nearly ten years ago. Mr. Bradlaugh was elected President; Messrs. A. Trevelyan, T. Slater, C. Watts, C.C. Cattell, R.A. Cooper, P.A.V. Le Lubez, N. Ridgway, G.W. Foote, G.H. Reddalls, and Mrs. Besant Vice Presidents.¹⁸ Messrs. Watts and Standring were elected as Secretary and Assistant-Secretary—both offices were then honorary, for the Society was too poor to pay the holders—and Mr. Le Lubez Treasurer. The result of the Conference was soon seen in

18 Among the Vice Presidents listed, the significant new name introduced is that of George William Foote (1850-1915), successor to Bradlaugh as President of the NSS and longtime editor of Freethought periodical literature (the *Freethinker*, which he founded in 1881, is still in print today); he came to see AB as a rival, objecting first to her use of Freethought platforms to preach Socialism and then to her discussing Theosophy with its constituency; see their 1886 exchange in his journal *Progress*, excerpted in Appendix A1.

the energy infused into the Freethought propaganda,¹⁹ and from that time to this the Society has increased in numbers and in influence, until that which was scarcely more than a skeleton has become a living power in the land on the side of all social and political reforms. The Council for 1875 consisted of but thirty-nine members, including President, Vice-Presidents, and Secretary, and of these only nine were available as a Central Executive. Let Freethinkers compare this meagre list with the present, and then let them “thank” man “and take courage”.

Lecturing at Leicester in June, I came for the first time across a falsehood of which I have since heard plenty. An irate Christian declared that I was responsible for a book entitled the “Elements of Social Science”, which was, he averred, the “Bible of Secularists”.²⁰ I had never heard of the book, but as he insisted that it was in favor of the abolition of marriage and that Mr. Bradlaugh agreed with it, I promptly contradicted him, knowing that Mr. Bradlaugh’s views on marriage were conservative rather than revolutionary. On enquiry afterwards I found that the book in question had been written some years before by a Doctor of Medicine, and had been sent for review by its publisher to the *National Reformer* among other papers. I found further that it consisted of three parts; the first dealt with the sexual relation, and advocated, from the standpoint of an experienced medical man, what is roughly known as “free love”; the second was entirely medical, dealing with diseases; the third consisted of a very clear and able exposition of the law of population as laid down by Malthus, and insisted—as John Stuart Mill had done—that it was the duty of married persons to voluntarily limit their families within their means of subsistence.²¹ Mr. Bradlaugh, in the *National Reformer*

19 Propaganda is here employed in its neutral capacity to mean the dissemination of ideas and information—in effect, more interested in spreading knowledge, not destroying an opposition.

20 The author of *Elements of Social Science; or, Physical, Sexual and Natural Religion; Containing an Exposition of the True Cause and Only Cure of the Three Primary Social Evils—Poverty, Prostitution and Celibacy* was the Scottish physician Dr. George Drysdale; AB refers to him by his pen name “G.R.” (his nickname was George Rex) in her brief review of another of his Truelove publications, *State Remedies for Poverty, War, and Pestilence*; see *Our Corner* 5.2 (1885): 118.

21 Subsequent to the Besant-Bradlaugh brouhaha over the publication of Knowlton’s *Fruits of Philosophy*, she wrote her own birth-control book entitled *The Law of Population: Its Consequences and Its Bearing upon*

in reviewing the book, stated that it was written “with honest and pure intent and purpose”, and recommended to working men the exposition of the law of population. Because he did this Christians and Tories who desire to injure him still insist that he shares the author’s views on sexual relations, and despite his reiterated contradictions, they quote detached pieces of the work, speaking against marriage, as containing his views. Anything more meanly vile and dishonest than this it would be difficult to imagine, yet such are the weapons used against Atheists in a Christian country. Unable to find in Mr. Bradlaugh’s own writings anything to serve their purpose, they take isolated passages from a book he neither wrote nor published, but once reviewed with a recommendation of a part of it which says nothing against marriage.

That the book is a remarkable one and deserves to be read has been acknowledged on all hands. Personally, I cordially dislike a large part of it, and dissent utterly from its views on the marital relation, but none the less I feel sure that the writer is an honest, good, and right meaning man. In the *Reasoner*, edited by Mr. George Jacob Holyoake,²² I find warmer praise of it than in the *National Reformer*; in the review the following passage appears:—

“In some respects all books of this class are evils: but it would be weakness and criminal prudery—a prudery as criminal as vice itself—not to say that such a book as the one in question is not only a far lesser evil than the one that it combats, but in one sense a book which it is a mercy to issue and courage to publish.”

The *Examiner*,²³ reviewing the same book, declared it to be

“A very valuable, though rather heterogeneous book.... This is, we believe, the only book that has fully, honestly, and in a scien-

Human Conduct and Morals; it first appeared in the *NR*, without the medical parts that were later added to the Freethought book publication in 1877; see Appendix D4 for the text of its first chapter.

22 George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), editor of the weekly *Reasoner* (founded in 1846) and author of the *Freethought Dictionary* (1853), was the leading advocate of Freethought during the years that Bradlaugh was attracted to the movement; see his *Sixty Years of an Agitator’s Life* (1892).

23 The *London Examiner* (1808-81) was variously edited by Leigh Hunt, Albany W. Fonblanque, and John Forster; it was eventually absorbed into the *London Review of Politics, Society, Literature, Art and Science*.

tific spirit recognised all the elements in the problem—How are mankind to triumph over poverty, with its train of attendant evils?—and fearlessly endeavored to find a practical solution.”

The British Journal of Homœopathy²⁴ wrote:

“Though quite out of the province of our journal, we cannot refrain from stating that this work is unquestionably the most remarkable one, in many respects, we have ever met with. Though we differ *toto cœlo*²⁵ from the author in his views of religion and morality, and hold some of his remedies to tend rather to a dissolution than a reconstruction of society, yet we are bound to admit the benevolence and philanthropy of his motives. The scope of the work is nothing less than the whole field of political economy.”

Ernest Jones and others wrote yet more strongly, but out of all these Charles Bradlaugh alone has been selected for reproach, and has had the peculiar views of the anonymous author fathered on himself. Why? The reason is not far to seek. None of the other writers are active Radical politicians, dangerous to the luxurious idleness of the non-productive but all-consuming “upper classes” of society. These know how easy it is to raise social prejudice against a man by setting afloat the idea that he desires to “abolish marriage and the home”. It is the most convenient poniard²⁶ and the one most certain to wound. Therefore those whose profligacy is notorious, who welcome into their society the Blandfords, Aylesburys, and St. Leonards,²⁷ rave against a man as a “destroyer of marriage” whose life is pure, and whose theories on this, as it happens, are “orthodox”, merely because his honest Atheism shames their hypocritical professions, and his sturdy Republicanism menaces their corrupt and rotting society.

24 The *British Journal of Homeopathy* was published 1843-84.

25 *Toto coelo* means “entirely.”

26 A poniard is a dagger with a slender triangular or squared blade.

27 Bishop Walter Blandford (1619-1675) was considered suspicious because he had pursued a degree in the arts; Sir Thomas Aylesbury (1576-1657) and his son William (1615-1656) were Royalists during the reign and fall of Charles I; and Edward Burtenshaw Sugden, Baron St. Leonards (1781-1875), who practiced law and was himself lord chancellor, was infamous for trying to embarrass Chancellor Brougham in Parliament.

XIII.

Sometimes my lecturing experiences were not of the smoothest. In June, 1875, I visited Darwen in Lancashire, and found that stone-throwing was considered a fair argument to be addressed to "the Atheist lecturer". On my last visit to that place in May, 1884, large and enthusiastic audiences attended the lectures, and not a sign of hostility was to be seen outside the hall. At Swansea, in March, 1876, the fear of violence was so great that no local friend had the courage to take the chair for me (a guarantee against damage to the hall had been exacted by the proprietor). I had to march on to the platform in solitary state, introduce myself, and proceed with my lecture. If violence had been intended, none was offered: it would have needed much brutality to charge on to a platform occupied by a solitary woman. (By the way, those who fancy that a lecturer's life is a luxurious one may note that the Swansea lecture spoken of was one of a series of ten, delivered within eight days at Wednesbury, Bilston, Kidderminster, Swansea, and Bristol, most of the travelling being performed through storm, rain, and snow.) On September, 4th, 1876, I had rather a lively time at Hoyland, a village near Barnsley. Mr Hebblethwaite, a Primitive Methodist minister,¹ "prepared the way of the" Atheist by pouring out virulent abuse on Atheism in general, and this Atheist in particular; two Protestant missionaries aided him vigorously, exhorting the pious Christians to "sweep Secularists out". The result was a very fair row; I got through the lecture, despite many interruptions, but when it was over a regular riot ensued; the enraged Christians shook their fists at me, swore at me, and finally took to kicking as I passed out to the cab; only one kick, however, reached me, and the attempts to overturn the cab were foiled by the driver, who put his horse at a gallop. A somewhat barbarous village, that same village of Hoyland. Congleton proved even livelier on September 25th and 26th. Mr. Bradlaugh lectured there on September 25th to an accompaniment of

1 The Primitive Methodists broke away from the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1811, reflecting their more impassioned and democratic spirit in comparison with some of the autocratic habits of some of the leading Methodist clergy. Methodism itself stemmed from the leadership of John Wesley (1703-91), and its alienation from the Church of England occurred in 1795; in general, Methodism experienced rapid growth in the nineteenth century because it helped many men and women in industrial England deal with economic hardship.

broken windows; I was sitting with Mrs. Wolstenholme Elmy in front of the platform, and received a rather heavy blow at the back of the head from a stone thrown by someone in the room. We had a mile and a half to walk from the hall to Mrs. Elmy's house, and this was done in the company of a mud-throwing crowd, who yelled curses, hymns, and foul words with delightful impartiality. On the following evening I was to lecture, and we were escorted to the hall by a stone-throwing crowd; while I was lecturing a man shouted "Put her out!" and a well-known wrestler of the neighborhood, named Burbery, who had come to the hall with seven friends, stood up in the front row and loudly interrupted. Mr. Bradlaugh, who was in the chair, told him to sit down, and as he persisted in making a noise, informed him that he must either be quiet or go out. "Put me out!" said Burbery, striking an attitude. Mr. Bradlaugh left the platform and walked up to the noisy swash-buckler, who at once grappled with him and tried to throw him; but Mr. Burbery had not reckoned on his opponent's strength, and when the "throw" was complete Mr. Burbery was underneath. Amid much excitement Mr. Burbery was propelled to the door, where he was handed over to the police, and the chairman resumed his seat and said "Go on", whereupon on I went and finished the lecture. There was plenty more stone-throwing outside, and Mrs. Elmy received a cut on the temple, but no serious harm was done—except to Christianity.

In the summer of 1875 a strong protest was made by the working classes against the grant of £142,000 for the Prince of Wales' visit to India, and on Sunday, July 18th, I saw for the first time one of the famous "Hyde Park Demonstrations".² Mr. Bradlaugh called a meeting to support Messrs. Taylor, Macdonald, Wilfrid Lawson, Burt, and the other fourteen members of the House of Commons who voted in opposition to the grant, and to protest against burdening the workers to provide for the amusement of a spendthrift prince. I did not go into the meeting, but, with Mr. Bradlaugh's two daughters,³ hovered on the outskirts. A

2 Hyde Park, the largest of London's public parks, has been the site of many demonstrations, usually held on Sundays; the right of assembly was recognized in 1872, and the Speakers' Corner marks the area where anyone can hold forth on any subject, as long as it is not obscene or blasphemous, or doesn't incite violence.

3 Bradlaugh's two daughters, Alice and Hypatia (married name Bonner), lived and worked devotedly with their father during the years that he was separated from his wife Susannah (she died from the effects of alco-

woman is considerably in the way in such a gathering, unless the speakers reach the platform in carriages, for she is physically unfitted to push her way through the dense mass of people, and has therefore to be looked after and saved from the crushing pressure of the crowd. I have always thought that a man responsible for the order of such huge gatherings ought not to be burdened in addition with the responsibility of protecting his female friends, and have therefore preferred to take care of myself outside the meetings both at Hyde Park and in Trafalgar Square.⁴ The method of organisation by which the London Radicals have succeeded in holding perfectly orderly meetings of enormous size is simple but effective. A large number of "marshals" volunteer and each of these hands in to Mr. Bradlaugh a list of the "stewards" he is prepared to bring; the "marshals" and "stewards" alike are members of the Radical and Secular associations of the metropolis. These officials all wear badges, a rosette of the Northampton election colors; directions are given to the marshals by Mr. Bradlaugh himself, and each marshal, with his stewards, turns up at the appointed place at the appointed time, and does the share of the work allotted to him. A ring two or three deep is formed round the place whence the speakers are to address the meeting, and those who form the ring stand linked arm-in-arm, making a living barrier round this empty spot. There a platform, brought thither in pieces, is screwed together, and into this enclosure only the chosen speakers and newspaper reporters are admitted. The marshals and stewards who are not told off for guarding the platform are distributed over the ground which the meeting is to occupy, and act as guardians of order.

The Hyde Park meeting against the royal grant was a thoroughly successful one, and a large number of protests came up

holism during the Knowlton Trial); they felt displaced by AB because of their father's close working relationship with her, and they never outgrew their resentment, despite the fact that the three of them undertook the same science degree program at the University of London in the 1880s.

- 4 Trafalgar Square, site of the King's Mews, was so named in 1835; dominated by the Nelson Column, it has long been the gathering place for political meetings and other demonstrations, most notably by the Chartists in the 1840s and then by the women's suffrage movement in the early years of the twentieth century. It was the focal point of the clash between demonstrators and the police that became known as "Bloody Sunday," in which AB figured prominently in the fall of 1887.

from all parts of the country. Being from the poorer classes, they were of course disregarded, but none the less was a strong agitation against royal grants carried on throughout the autumn and winter months. The National Secular Society determined to gather signatures to a “monster petition against royal grants”, and the superintendence of this was placed in my hands. The petition was drafted by Mr. Bradlaugh, and ran as follows:—

“TO THE HONORABLE THE COMMONS OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND, IN PARLIAMENT ASSEMBLED.

“The humble petition of the undersigned,

“Prays,—That no further grant or allowance may be made to any member of the Royal Family until an account shall have been laid before your Honorable House, showing the total real and personal estates and incomes of each and every member of the said Royal Family who shall be in receipt of any pension or allowance, and also showing all posts and places of profit severally held by members of the said Royal Family, and also showing all pensions, if any, formerly charged on any estates now enjoyed by any member or members of the said Royal Family, and in case any such pensions shall have been transferred, showing how and at what date such transfer took place.”

Day after day, week after week, month after month, the postman delivered rolls of paper, little and big, each roll containing names and addresses of men and women who protested against the waste of public money on our greedy and never-satisfied Royal House.⁵ The sheets often bore the marks of the places to which they had been carried; from a mining district some would come coal-dust-blackened, which had been signed in the mines by workers who grudged to idleness the fruits of toil; from an agricultural district the sheets bore often far too many “crosses”, the “marks” of those whom Church and landlord had left in ignorance, regarding them only as machines for sowing and reaping. From September, 1875, to March, 1876, they came in steady

5 The Royal House of the United Kingdom during Victoria's reign was the House of Hanover; upon her death, it assumed the dynastic name of the House of Saxe-Coburg, after Victoria's German-born husband, Albert; anti-German sentiment during World War I led to George V proclaiming its new name of Windsor in 1917.

stream, and each was added to the ever-lengthening roll which lay in one corner of my sitting-room and which assumed ever larger and larger proportions. At last the work was over, and on June 16th, 1876, the "monster"—rolled on a mahogany pole presented by a London friend, and encased in American cloth—was placed in a carriage to be conveyed to the House of Commons; the heading ran: "The petition of the undersigned Charles Bradlaugh, Annie Besant, Charles Watts, and 102,934 others". Unrolled, it was nearly a mile in length, and a very happy time we had in rolling the last few hundred yards. When we arrived at the House, Mr. Bradlaugh and Mr. Watts carried the petition up Westminster Hall,⁶ each holding one end of the mahogany pole. Messrs. Burt and Macdonald took charge of the "monster" at the door of the House, and, carrying it in, presented it in due form. The presentation caused considerable excitement both in the House and in the press, and the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* said some kindly words of the "labor and enthusiasm" bestowed on the petition by myself.

At the beginning of August, 1875, the first attempt to deprive me of my little daughter, Mabel, was made, but fortunately proved unsuccessful. The story of the trick played is told in the *National Reformer* of August 22nd, and I quote it just as it appeared there:—

"PERSONAL.—Mrs. Annie Besant, as some of our readers are aware, was the wife of a Church of England clergyman, the Rev. Frank Besant, Vicar of Sibsey, near Boston, in Lincolnshire. There is no need, at present, to say anything about the earlier portion of her married life; but when Mrs. Besant's opinions on religious matters became liberal, the conduct of her husband rendered a separation absolutely necessary, and in 1873 a formal deed of separation was drawn up, and duly executed. Under this deed, Mrs. Besant is entitled to the sole custody and control of her infant daughter Mabel until the child becomes of age, with the proviso that the little girl is to visit her father for one month in each year. Having recently obtained possession of the person of the little child under cover of the annual visit, the Rev. Mr. Besant sought to deprive Mrs. Besant entirely of her daughter, on

6 Westminster Hall, built in 1097, is the only surviving portion of Edward the Confessor's Palace of Westminster; now the vestibule of the House of Commons, it housed the Law Courts from the 1200s until 1882.

the ground of Mrs. Besant's Atheism. Vigorous steps were at once taken by Messrs. Lewis and Lewis (to whom our readers will remember we entrusted the case of Mr. Lennard against Mr. Woolrych), by whose advise Mrs. Besant at once went down herself to Sibsey to demand the child; the little girl had been hidden, and was not at the Vicarage, but we are glad to report that Mrs. Besant has, after some little difficulty, recovered the custody of her daughter. It was decided against Percy Bysshe Shelley that an Atheist father could not be the guardian of his own children.⁷ If this law be appealed to, and anyone dares to enforce it, we shall contest it step by step; and while we are out of England, we know that in case of any attempt to retake the child by force we may safely leave our new advocate to the protection of the stout arms of our friends, who will see that no injustice of this kind is done her. So far as the law courts are concerned, we have the most complete confidence in Mr. George Henry Lewis,⁸ and we shall fight the case to the House of Lords if need be.

CHARLES BRADLAUGH."

The attempt to take the child from me by force indeed failed, but later the theft was successfully carried out by due process of law. It is always a blunder from a tactical point of view for a Christian to use methods of illegal violence in persecuting an Atheist in this Christian land; legal violence is a far safer weapon, for courage can checkmate the first, while it is helpless before the second. All Christians who adopt the sound old principle that "no faith need be kept with the heretic" should remember that they can always guard themselves against unpleasant consequences by breaking faith under cover of the laws against heresy, which still remain on our Statute Book *ad majorem Dei gloriam*.⁹

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- 7 The Lord Chancellor denied Shelley custody of his two children by Harriet Westbrook shortly after she committed suicide in 1816 (Shelley subsequently married Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, with whom he had been living); the young poet and his friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg had already been expelled from University College, Oxford, for publishing a pamphlet entitled "The Necessity of Atheism" (1811).
- 8 George Henry Lewis (1833-1911), legal counsel for the NSS, was noted for favoring equal rights for both sexes, and he was an instrumental voice in the proceedings called before the 1909 royal commission that inquired into the workings of the divorce laws.
- 9 The laws against heresy included the Blasphemy Act (1698), Fox's Libel Act (1792), the Trinity Act (1813), the Act for the Prevention of Blas-

In September, 1875, Mr. Bradlaugh again sailed for America, leaving plenty of work to be done by his colleagues before he returned. The Executive of the National Secular Society had determined to issue a "Secular Song Book",¹⁰ and the task of selection and of editing was confided to me. The little book was duly issued, and ran through two editions; then, feeling that it was marred by many sins both of commission and omission, I set my face against the publication of a third edition, hoping that a compilation more worthy of Free Thought might be made. I am half inclined to take the matter up again, and set to work at a fresh collection.

The delivery and publication of a course of six lectures on the early part of the French Revolution was another portion of that autumn's work; they involved a large amount of labor, as I had determined to tell the story from the people's point of view, and was therefore compelled to read a large amount of the current literature of the time, as well as the great standard histories of Louis Blanc, Michelet, and others.¹¹ Fortunately for me, Mr. Bradlaugh had a splendid collection of works on the subject, and before he left England he brought to me two cabs full of books, French and English, from all points of view, aristocratic, ecclesiastical, democratic, and I studied these diligently and impartially until the French Revolution became to me as a drama in which I had myself taken part, and the actors therein became personal friends and foes. In this, again, as in so much of my public work, I have to thank Mr. Bradlaugh for the influence which led me to read fully all sides of a question, and to read most carefully those from which I differed most, ere I judged myself competent to write or to speak thereon.

The late autumn was clouded by the news of Mr. Bradlaugh's serious illness in America. After struggling for some time against ill-health he was struck down by an attack of pleurisy,¹² to which

phemous and Seditious Libels (1819), the Libel Act (1843), and the Obscene Publications Act, also known as Lord Campbell's Act (1857); the Statute Book is the official collection of statutes of Britain; and the Latin phrase *ad maiorem Dei Gloriam* means "according to the greater glory of God."

10 The *Secular Song and Hymn Book* went through two editions; its introduction is reproduced in Appendix D2.

11 Louis Blanc (1811-82), the French Utopian Socialist, and Jules Michelet (1798-1874), the French nationalist historian, both wrote multi-volume texts entitled *Histoire de la Revolution Française*.

12 Pleurisy is an inflammation of the pleura in the chest cavity.

soon was added typhoid fever, and for a time lay at the brink of the grave. Dr. Otis, his able physician, finding that it was impossible to give him the necessary attendance at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, put him into his own carriage and drove him to the Hospital of St. Luke's, where he confided him to the care of Dr. Leaming, himself also visiting him daily. Of this illness the *Baltimore Advertiser* wrote:

"Mr. Charles Bradlaugh, the famous English Radical lecturer, has been so very dangerously ill that his life has almost been despaired of. He was taken ill at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, and partially recovered; but on the day upon which a lecture had been arranged from him before the Liberal Club he was taken down a second time with a relapse, which has been very near proving fatal. The cause was overwork and complete nervous prostration which brought on low fever. His physician has allowed one friend only to see him daily for five minutes, and removed him to St. Luke's Hospital for the sake of the absolute quiet, comfort, and intelligent attendance he could secure there, and for which he was glad to pay munificently. This long and severe illness has disappointed the hopes and retarded the object for which he came to this country; but he is gentleness and patience itself in his sickness in this strange land, and has endeared himself greatly to his physicians and attendants by his gratitude and appreciation of the slightest attention."

There is no doubt that the care so willingly lavished on the English stranger saved his life, and those who in England honor Charles Bradlaugh as chief and love him as friend must always keep in grateful memory those who in his sorest need served him so nobly well. Those who think that an Atheist cannot calmly face the prospect of death might well learn a lesson from the fortitude and courage shown by an Atheist as he lay at the point of death, far from home and from all he loved best. The Rev. Mr. Frothingham bore public and admiring testimony in his own church to Mr. Bradlaugh's perfect serenity, at once fearless and unpretending, and, himself a Theist, gave willing witness to the Atheist's calm strength.

Mr. Bradlaugh returned to England at the end of December, worn to a shadow and terribly weak, and for many a long month he bore the traces of his wrestle with death. Indeed, he felt the effect of the illness for years, for typhoid fever is a foe whose weapons leave scars even after the healing of the wounds it inflicts.

The first work done by Mr. Bradlaugh on resuming the editorial chair of the *National Reformer*, was to indite a vigorous protest against the investment of national capital in the Suez Canal Shares. He exposed the financial condition of Egypt, gave detail after detail of the Khedive's indebtedness, unveiled the rottenness of the Egyptian Government, warned the people of the danger of taking the first steps in a path which must lead to continual interference in Egyptian finance, denounced the shameful job perpetrated by Mr. Disraeli in borrowing the money for the purchase from the Rothschilds at enormous interest.¹³ His protest was, of course, useless, but its justice has been proved by the course of events. The bombarding of Alexandria, the shameful repression of the national movement in Egypt, the wholesale and useless slaughter in the Soudan, the waste of English lives and English money, the new burden of debt and of responsibility now assumed by the Government, all these are the results of the fatal purchase of shares in the Suez Canal by Mr. Disraeli; yet against the chorus of praise which resounded from every side when the purchase was announced, but one voice of disapproval and of warning was raised at first; others soon caught the warning and saw the dangers it pointed out, but for awhile Charles Bradlaugh stood alone in his opposition, and to him belongs the credit of at once seeing the peril which lay under the purchase.

The 1876 Conference of the National Secular Society held at Leeds showed the growing power of the organisation, and was made notable by a very pleasant incident—the presentation to a miner, William Washington, of a silver tea-pot and some books, in recognition of a very noble act of self-devotion. An explosion had occurred on December 6th, 1870, at Swaithe Main pit, in which 143 miners were killed; a miner belonging to a neighboring pit,

13 The Suez Canal was built by the French in 1869, and the Khedive, ruler of Egypt from 1867 to 1914, owned slightly less than half its shares; his authority in Egypt was granted through his position as a semi-independent viceroy of the Sultan of Turkey. Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield (1804-81), was twice prime minister of England (1868; 1874-80); a novelist as well as a statesman, he provided the Conservative Party with a combination of Tory democracy and imperialism. The Rothschilds were the most famous of the European banking dynasties; it was Lionel Nathan Rothschild, member of the House of Commons since 1858, who in 1875 provided the £4,000,000 which allowed the British government to become the principal shareholder in the Suez Canal Company.

named William Washington, an Atheist, when every one was hanging back, sprang into the cage to descend into the pit in forlorn hope of rescue, when to descend seemed almost certain death. Others swiftly followed the gallant volunteer, but he had set the example, and it was felt by the Executive of the National Secular Society that his heroism deserved recognition. William Washington set his face against any gift to himself, so the subscription¹⁴ to a testimonial was limited to 6d., and a silver teapot was presented to him for his wife and some books for his children. At this same Conference a committee was appointed, consisting of Messrs. Charles Bradlaugh, G.J. Holyoake, C. Watts, R.A. Cooper, ____ Gimson, T. Slater, and Mrs. Besant, to draw up a fresh statement of the principles and objects of the National Secular Society; it was decided that this statement should be submitted to the ensuing Conference, that the deliberation on the report of the Committee should "be open to all Freethinkers, but that only those will be entitled to vote on the ratification who declare their determination to enter the Society on the basis of the ratified constitution". It was hoped that by this means various scattered and independent societies might be brought into union, and that the National Secular Society might be thereby strengthened. The committee held a very large number of meetings and finally decided on the following statement, which was approved of at the Conference held at Nottingham in 1877, and stands now as the "Principles and Object of the National Secular Society":—

"The National Secular Society has been formed to maintain the principles and rights of Freethought, and to direct their application to the Secular improvement of this life.

"By the principle of Freethought is meant the exercise of the understanding upon relevant facts, and independently of penal or priestly intimidation.

"By the rights of Freethought are meant the liberty of free criticism for the security of truth, and the liberty of free publicity for the extension of truth.

"Secularism relates to the present existence of man, and to actions the issue of which can be tested by experience.

"It declares that the promotion of human improvement and happiness is the highest duty, and that morality is to be tested by utility.

14 A subscription is an amount pledged by a group of subscribers for a specific person or cause.

“That in order to promote effectually the improvement and happiness of mankind, every individual of the human family ought to be well placed and well instructed, and that all who are of a suitable age ought to be usefully employed for their own and the general good.

“That human improvement and happiness cannot be effectually promoted without civil and religious liberty; and that, therefore, it is the duty of every individual to actively attack all barriers to equal freedom of thought and utterance for all, upon political, theological, and social subjects.

“A Secularist is one who deduces his moral duties from considerations which pertain to this life, and who, practically recognising the above duties, devotes himself to the promotion of the general good.

“The object of the National Secular Society is to disseminate the above principles by every legitimate means in its power.”

At this same Conference of Leeds was inaugurated the subscription to the statue to be erected in Rome to the memory of Giordano Bruno,¹⁵ burned in that city for Atheism in 1600; this resulted in the collection of £60.

The Executive appointed by the Leeds Conference made great efforts to induce the Freethinkers of the country to work for the repeal of the Blasphemy Laws, and in October 1876 they issued a copy of a petition against those evil laws to every one of the forty branches of the Society. The effort proved, however, of little avail. The laws had not been put in force for a long time, and were regarded with apathy as being obsolete, and it has needed the cruel imprisonments inflicted by Mr. Justice North on Messrs. Foote, Ramsey, and Kemp,¹⁶ to arouse the Freethought party to a sense of their duty in the matter.

15 Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), Italian philosopher, astronomer, mathematician, and occultist, anticipated many of the theories of modern science; after variously seeking asylum elsewhere on the continent and in England, he returned to Italy, where he was burned at the stake for his heretical opinions, which challenged the orthodoxies of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism alike.

16 W.J. Ramsey was hired in 1877 by AB and Bradlaugh as manager of their newly-formed Freethought Publishing Company on Stonecutter Street; Henry A. Kemp worked in the publishing house as a printer (he would later be tried for his role in printing “offensive” copies of the *Freethinker*, considered by some to be a forerunner to the modern tabloid).

The year 1877 had scarcely opened ere we found ourselves with a serious fight on our hands. A pamphlet written early in the present century by Charles Knowlton, M.D., entitled “The Fruits of Philosophy”, which had been sold unchallenged in England for nearly forty years, was suddenly seized at Bristol as an obscene publication.¹⁷ The book had been supplied in the ordinary course of business by Mr. Charles Watts, but the Bristol bookseller had altered its price, had inserted some indecent pictures in it, and had sold it among literature to which the word obscene was fairly applied. In itself, Dr. Knowlton’s work was merely a physiological treatise, and it advocated conjugal prudence and parental responsibility; it argued in favor of early marriage, but as overlarge families among persons of limited incomes imply either pauperism, or lack of necessary food, clothing, education, and fair start in life for the children, Dr. Knowlton advocated the restriction of the number of the family within the means of existence, and stated the means by which this restriction should be carried out. On hearing of the prosecution, Mr. Watts went down to Bristol, and frankly announced himself as the publisher of the book. Soon after his return to London he was arrested on the charge of having published an obscene book, and was duly liberated on bail. Mr. and Mrs. Watts, Mr. Bradlaugh and myself met to arrange our plan of united action on Friday, January 12th, and it was decided that Mr. Watts should defend the book, that a fund should at once be raised for his legal expenses, and that once more the right of publication of useful knowledge in a cheap form should be defended by the leaders of the Freethought party. After long and friendly discussion we separated with the plan of the campaign arranged, and it was decided that I should claim the sympathy and help of the Plymouth friends, whom I was to address on the following Sunday, January 14th. I went down to Plymouth on January 13th, and there received a telegram from Mr. Watts, saying that a change of plan had been decided on. I was puzzled, but none the less I appealed for help as I had promised to do, and a collection of £8

17 Dr. Charles Knowlton (1800-50), a Massachusetts physician, first published *Fruits of Philosophy: The Private Companion of Young Married People* anonymously in the United States in 1832; it had been published in Britain by James Watson (1799-1874) since 1834 (when “couples” was substituted for “people” in the subtitle) and sold by the Holyoake Publishing Company until Watson’s death, when his widow sold the printing plates to Watts.

1s. 10d. for Mr. Watts' Defence Fund was made after my evening lecture. To my horror, on returning to London, I found that Mr. Watts had given way before the peril of imprisonment, and had decided to plead guilty to the charge of publishing an obscene book, and to throw himself on the mercy of the Court, relying on his previous good character and on an alleged ignorance of the content of the incriminated work. The latter plea we knew to be false, for Mr. Watts before going down to Bristol to declare himself responsible for the pamphlet had carefully read it and had marked all the passages which, being physiological, might be attacked as "obscene". This marked copy he had sent to the Bristol bookseller, before he himself went to Bristol to attend the trial, and under these circumstances any pretence of ignorance of the contents of the book was transparently inaccurate. Mr. Watts' surrender, of course, upset all the arrangements we had agreed on; Mr. Bradlaugh and myself were prepared to stand by him in battle, but not in surrender. I at once returned to the Secretary of the Plymouth Branch the money collected for defence, not for capitulation, and Mr. Bradlaugh published the following brief statement in the *National Reformer* for January 21st:

"PROSECUTION OF MR. CHARLES WATTS.—Mr. Charles Watts, as most of our readers will have already learned, has been committed for trial at the Central Criminal Court for February 5th, for misdemeanor, for publication of a work on the population question, entitled "Fruits of Philosophy", by Charles Knowlton, M.D. This book has been openly published in England and America for more than thirty years. It was sold in England by James Watson,¹⁸ who always bore the highest repute. On James Watson's retirement from business it was sold by Holyoake & Co., at Fleet Street House, and was afterwards sold by Mr. Austin Holyoake¹⁹ until the time of his death; and a separate edition was, up till last week, still sold by Mr. Brooks, of 282, Strand, W.C. When Mr. James Watson died, Mr. Charles Watts bought from James Watson's widow a large quantity of stereotype plates, including this work. If this book is to be condemned as obscene, so also in my opinion must be many published by Messrs. W.H.

18 Watson was considered a successor to Richard Carlile (1790-1843) in the struggle for freedom of the press; he was active in many of the reform movements of his time.

19 Austin Holyoake (1826-74), younger brother of George, was also the author of a pamphlet entitled *Large or Small Families* (1870).

Smith & Son,²⁰ and other publishers, against whose respectability no imputation has been made. Such books as Darwin's 'Origin of Species' and 'Descent of Man' must immediately be branded as obscene, while no medical work must be permitted publication; and all theological works, like those of Dulaure, Inman, etc., dealing with ancient creeds, must at once be suppressed.²¹ The bulk of the publications of the society for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, together with its monthly organ, the *Shield* would be equally liable.²² The issue of the greater part of classic authors, and of Lemprière, Shakspere, Sterne, Fielding, Richardson, Rabelais, etc.,²³ must be stopped: while the Bible—containing obscene passages omitted from the dictionary—must no longer be permitted circulation. All these contain obscenity which is either inserted to amuse or to instruct,

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- 20 William Henry Smith (1825-91), news agency entrepreneur and Speaker of the House of Commons, was the mastermind behind railway station bookstalls, and his circulating library competed for readers with Mudie's; Smith later visited Bradlaugh in his last illness to inform him that the House had voted to strike from their records any mention of his expulsions from Parliament.
- 21 Charles Darwin (1809-82), renowned naturalist, was the author of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or, The Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859) and *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871); Jacques-Antoine Dulaure (1755-1835), French historian and archeologist, was best known for *The Gods of Generation: A History of Phallic Cults among Ancients and Moderns* (1805); and Thomas Inman (1820-76), British physician and mythologist, published such works as *Ancient Pagan and Modern Christian Symbolism Exposed and Explained* (1869).
- 22 The Contagious Diseases Acts were passed in 1864, 1866, and 1869, enabling police to force any woman suspected of being a prostitute to submit to a medical examination, and if she were found to be suffering from venereal disease, she could be detained for treatment. Originally entitled the National Anti-Contagious Diseases Act Extension Association, the first organization seeking to rescind these sexist laws did not include any women, and so Josephine Butler (1828-1906) formed the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act in 1869. The following year the united NARCDCA began publishing its weekly circular, the *Shield*, and although the acts were finally repealed in 1886, the organization continued to function until 1890.
- 23 Of the authors mentioned, the one most in need of a gloss is John Lemprière (1765-1824), classicist and divine, whose *Classical Dictionary* (1792) has gone through many editions; the lectionary is a book oflections, or lessons, for use in church service.

and the medical work now assailed deals with physiological points purely to instruct, and to increase the happiness of men and women.

“If the pamphlet now prosecuted had been brought to me for publication, I should probably have declined to publish it, not because of the subject-matter, but because I do not like its style. If I had once published it, I should defend it until the very last. Here Mr. Watts and myself disagree in opinion; and as he is the person chiefly concerned, it is, of course, right that his decision should determine what is done. He tells me that he thinks the pamphlet indefensible, and that he was misled in publishing it without examination as part of James Watson’s stock. I think it ought to be fought right through. Under these circumstances I can only leave Mr. Watts to speak for himself, as we so utterly differ in opinion on this case that I cease to be his proper interpreter. I have, therefore, already offered Mr. Watts the columns of the *National Reformer*, that he may put before the party his view of the case, which he does in another column. —C. BRADLAUGH.”

XIV.

Up to this time (January, 1877) Mr. Watts had acted as sub-editor of the *National Reformer*, and printer and publisher of the books and pamphlets issued by Mr. Bradlaugh and myself. The continuance of this common work obviously became impossible after Mr. Watts had determined to surrender one of his publications under threat of prosecution. We felt that for two main reasons we could no longer publicly associate ourselves with him: (1) We could not retain on our publications the name of a man who had pleaded guilty to the publication of an obscene work; (2) Many of our writings were liable to prosecution for blasphemy, and it was necessary that we should have a publisher who could be relied on to stand firm in time of peril; we felt that if Mr. Watts surrendered one thing he would be likely to surrender others. This feeling on my part was strengthened by the remembrance of a request of his made a few months before, that I would print my own name instead of his as publisher of a political song I had issued, on the ground that it might come within the law of seditious libel. I had readily acceded at the time, but when absolute surrender under attack followed on timid precaution against attack, I felt that a bolder publisher was necessary to me. No particular blame should be laid on persons who are constitutionally

timid; they have their own line of usefulness, and are often pleasant and agreeable folk enough; but they are out of place in the front rank of a fighting movement, for their desertion in face of the enemy means added danger for those left to carry on the fight. We therefore decided to sever ourselves from Mr. Watts; and Mr. Bradlaugh, in the *National Reformer* of January 28th, inserted the following statement:

“The divergence of opinion between myself and Mr. Charles Watts is so complete on the Knowlton case, that he has already ceased to be sub-editor of this journal, and I have given him notice determining our connexion on and from March 25th. My reasons for this course are as follows. The Knowlton pamphlet is either decent or indecent. If decent it ought to be defended; if indecent it should never have been published. To judge it indecent is to condemn, with the most severe condemnation, James Watson whom I respected, and Austin Holyoake with whom I worked. I hold the work to be defensible, and I deny the right of any one to interfere with the full and free discussion of social questions affecting the happiness of the nation. The struggle for a free press has been one of the marks of the Freethought Party throughout its history, and as long as the Party permits me to hold its flag, I will never voluntarily lower it.¹ I have no right and no power to dictate to Mr. Watts the course he should pursue, but I have the right and duty to refuse to associate my name with a submission which is utterly repugnant to my nature, and inconsistent with my whole career.”

After a long discussion, Mr. Bradlaugh and I made up our minds as to the course we would pursue. We decided that we would never again place ourselves at a publisher's mercy, but would ensure the defence of all we published by publishing everything ourselves; we resolved to become printers and publishers, and to take any small place we could find and open it as a Freethought shop. I undertook the sub-editorship of the *National Reformer* and the weekly Summary of News, which had hitherto been done by Mr. Watts, was placed in the hands of Mr. Bradlaugh's daughters. The next thing to do was to find a publishing

1 Between 1695 and 1792, Britain had advanced its freedom of the press to an enviable degree, in contrast to the censorship experienced in France and Russia; the Blasphemy Acts, among others, threatened that status.

office. Somewhere within reach of Fleet Street the office must be; small it must be, as we had no funds and the risk of starting a business of which we knew nothing was great. Still "all things are possible to" those who are resolute;² we discovered a tumble-down little place in Stonecutter Street and secured it by the good offices of our friend, Mr. Charles Herbert; we borrowed a few hundred pounds from personal friends, and made our new tenement habitable; we drew up a deed of partnership, founding the "Freethought Publishing Company", Mr. Bradlaugh and myself being the only partners; we engaged Mr. W.J. Ramsey as manager of the business; and in the *National Reformer* of February 25th we were able to announce:

"The publishing office of the *National Reformer* and of all the works of Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant is now at 28, Stonecutter Street, E.C., three doors from Faringdon Street, where the manager, Mr. W.J. Ramsey, will be glad to receive orders for the supply of any Freethought literature".

A week later we issued the following address:

"ADDRESS FROM THE FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY TO THE READERS OF THE 'NATIONAL REFORMER.'"

"When the prospectus of the *National Reformer* was issued by the founder, Charles Bradlaugh, in 1859, he described its policy as 'Atheistic in theology, Republican in politics, and Malthusian in social economy', and a free platform was promised and has been maintained for the discussion of each of these topics. In ventilating the population question the stand taken by Mr. Bradlaugh, both here and on the platform, is well known to our old readers, and many works bearing on this vital subject have been advertised and reviewed in these columns. In this the *National Reformer* has followed the course pursued by Mr. George Jacob Holyoake, who in 1853 published a 'Freethought Directory', giving a list of the various books supplied from the 'Fleet Street House', and which list contained amongst others:

"Anti-Marcus on the Population Question."

2 This is a paraphrase of (and change from) the biblical entry in which Jesus says, "If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth" (Mark 9:23).

“Fowler’s Tracts on Physiology, etc.

“Dr. C. Knowlton’s ‘Fruits of Philosophy’.

“Moral Physiology: a plain treatise on the Population Question.’

“In this Directory Mr. G.J. Holyoake says:

“No. 147 Fleet Street is a Central Secular Book Dépôt, where all works extant in the English language on the side of Freethought in Religion, Politics, Morals, and Culture are kept in stock, or are procured at short notice.’

“We shall try to do at 28 Stonecutter Street that which Mr. Holyoake’s Directory promised for Fleet Street House.

“The partners in the Freethought Publishing Company are Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh, who have entered into a legal partnership for the purpose of sharing the legal responsibility of the works they publish.

“We intend to publish nothing that we do not think we can morally defend. All that we do publish we shall defend. We do not mean that we shall agree with all we publish, but we shall, so far as we can, try to keep the possibility of free utterance of earnest, honest opinion.

“It may not be out of place here to remind new readers of this journal of that which old readers well know, that no articles are editorial except those which are unsigned or bear the name of the editor, or that of the sub-editor; for each and every other article the author is allowed to say his own say in his own way; the editor only furnishes the means to address our readers, leaving to him or to her the right and responsibility of divergent thought.

“ANNIE BESANT.

“CHARLES BRADLAUGH.”

Thus we found ourselves suddenly launched on a new undertaking, and with some amusement and much trepidation I realised that I was “in business”, with business knowledge amounting to *nil*. I had, however, fair ability and plenty of goodwill, and I determined to learn my work, feeling proud that I had become one of the list of “Freethought publishers”, who published for love of the cause of freedom, and risked all for the triumph of a principle ere it wore “silver slippers and walked in the sunshine with applause”.³

3 This is a variation on the reply given to Christian by By-ends, who is traveling from the town of Fair-speech to the Celestial City, in Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*: “They are for religion when in rags and contempt; but I am for him when he walks in his silver slippers, in the sunshine, and with applause” (Part I, Seventh Stage).

On February 8th Mr. Watts was tried at the Old Bailey.⁴ He withdrew his plea of “Not Guilty”, and pleaded “Guilty”. His Counsel urged that he was a man of good character, that Mr. George Jacob Holyoake had sold the incriminated pamphlet, that Mr. Watts had bought the stereo-plates of it in the stock of the late Mr. Austin Holyoake, which he had taken over bodily, and that he had never read the book until after the Bristol investigation. “Mr. Watts pledges himself to me”, the counsel stated, “that he was entirely ignorant of the contents of this pamphlet until he heard passages read from it in the prosecution at Bristol”. The counsel for the prosecution pointed out that this statement was inaccurate, and read passages from Mr. Watts’ deposition made on the first occasion at Bristol, in which Mr. Watts stated that he had perused the book, and was prepared to justify it as a medical work. He, however, did not wish to press the case, if the plates and stock were destroyed, and Mr. Watts was accordingly discharged on his own recognizances in £500 to come up for judgment when called on.

While this struggle was raging, an old friend of Mr. Bradlaugh’s, Mr. George Odger,⁵ was slowly passing away; the good old man lay dying in his poor lodgings in High Street, Oxford Street, and I find recorded in the *National Reformer* of March 4th, that on February 28th we had been to see him, and that “he is very feeble and is, apparently, sinking fast; but he is as brave and bright, facing his last enemy, as he has ever been facing his former ones”. He died on March 4th, and was buried in Brompton Cemetery on the 10th of the same month.

A grave question now lay before us for decision. The Knowlton pamphlet had been surrendered; was that surrender to stand as the last word of the Freethought party on a book which had been sold by the most prominent men in its ranks for forty years? To our minds such surrender, left unchallenged, would be a stain on all who submitted to it, and we decided that faulty as the book

4 The Old Bailey Sessions House, next to Newgate Prison, exercised criminal jurisdiction over London and adjacent counties until 1834, after which it was renamed the Central Criminal Court, though the original name was retained in common parlance for some time.

5 George Odger (1820-77), trade unionist and son of a Cornish miner, organized a welcoming reception for Garibaldi, helped arrange for a large assembly in support of the Northern states during the American Civil War, and became president of the International Association of Working Men in 1870.

was in many respects it had yet become the symbol of a great principle, of the right to circulate physiological knowledge among the poor in pamphlets published at a price they could afford to pay. Deliberately counting the risk, recognising that by our action we should subject ourselves to the vilest slander, knowing that Christian malice would misrepresent and ignorance would echo the misrepresentation—we yet resolved that the sacrifice must be made, and made by us in virtue of our position in the Freethought Party. If the leaders flinched how could the followers be expected to fight? The greatest sacrifice had to be made by Mr. Bradlaugh. How would an indictment for publishing an obscene book affect his candidature for Northampton? What a new weapon for his foes, what a new difficulty for his friends! I may say here that our worst forebodings were realised by the event; we have been assailed as “vendors of obscene literature”, as “writers of obscene books”, as “living by the circulation of filthy books”. And it is because such accusations have been widely made that I here place on permanent record the facts of the case, for thus, at least, some honest opponents will learn the truth and will cease to circulate the slanders they may have repeated in ignorance.

On February 27th our determination to republish the Knowlton pamphlet was announced by Mr. Bradlaugh in an address delivered by him at the Hall of Science on “The Right of Publication”. Extracts from a brief report, published in the *National Reformer* of March 11th, will show the drift of his statement:

“Mr. Bradlaugh was most warmly welcomed to the platform, and reiterated cheers greeted him as he rose to make his speech. Few who heard him that evening will forget the passion and the pathos with which he spoke. The defence of the right to publish was put as strongly and as firmly as words could put it, and the determination to maintain that right, in dock⁶ and in jail as on the platform, rang out with no uncertain sound. Truly, as the orator said: ‘The bold words I have spoken from this place would be nothing but the emptiest brag and the coward’s boast, if I flinched now in the day of battle’. Every word of praise of the fighters of old would fall in disgrace on the head of him who spoke it, if when the time came to share in their peril he shrunk back from the danger of the strife.... Mr. Bradlaugh drew a graphic picture of

6 “In dock” refers to the place in court where the prisoner stands or sits.

the earlier struggles for a free press, and then dealt with the present state of the law; from that he passed on to the pamphlet which is the test-question of the hour; he pointed out how some parts of it were foolish, such as the 'philosophical proem',⁷ but remarked that he knew no right in law to forbid the publication of all save wisdom; he then showed how, had he originally been asked to publish the pamphlet, he should have raised some objections to its style, but that was a very different matter from permitting the authorities to stop its sale; the style of many books might be faulty without the books being therefore obscene. He contended the book was a perfectly moral medical work, and was no more indecent than every other medical work dealing with the same subject. The knowledge it gave was useful knowledge; many a young man might be saved from disease by such a knowledge as was contained in the book; if it was argued that such books should not be sold at so cheap a rate, he replied that it was among the masses that such physiological knowledge was needed, 'and if there is one subject above all others', he exclaimed, 'for which a man might gladly sacrifice his hopes and his life, surely it is for that which would relieve his fellow-men from poverty, the mother of crimes, and would make happy homes where now only want and suffering reign'. He had fully counted the cost; he knew all he might lose; but Carlyle⁸ before him had been imprisoned for teaching the same doctrine, 'and what Carlyle did for his day, I, while health and strength remain, will do for mine'."

The position we took up in republishing the pamphlet was clearly stated in the preface which we wrote for it, and which I here reprint, as it gives plainly and briefly the facts of the case:

"PUBLISHERS' PREFACE TO DR. KNOWLTON'S
'FRUITS OF PHILOSOPHY'.

"The pamphlet which we now present to the public is one which has been lately prosecuted under Lord Campbell's

7 A proem is a preface, essentially an introductory or preliminary discourse to a longer piece of writing.

8 Carlyle was a journalist, freethinker, and birth control advocate; he had been imprisoned for a total of nine years for selling, among other works, Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason* as well as Shelley's *Queen Mab*; see notes II.3 and XIII.18.

Act,⁹ and which we now republish in order to test the right of publication. It was originally written by Charles Knowlton, M.D., an American physician, whose degree entitles him to be heard with respect on a medical question. It is openly sold and widely circulated in America at the present time. It was first published in England, about forty years ago, by James Watson, the gallant Radical who came to London and took up Richard Carlile's work when Carlile was in jail. He sold it unchallenged for many years, approved it, and recommended it. It was printed and published by Messrs. Holyoake and Co., and found its place, with other works of a similar character, in their 'Freethought Directory' of 1853, and was thus identified with Freethought literature at the then leading Freethought *depôt*. Mr. Austin Holyoake, working in conjunction with Mr. Bradlaugh at the *National Reformer* office, Johnson's Court, printed and published it in his turn, and this well-known Freethought advocate, in his 'Large or Small Families', selected this pamphlet, together with R.D. Owen's 'Moral Physiology' and the 'Elements of Social Science', for special recommendation. Mr. Charles Watts, succeeding to Mr. Austin Holyoake's business, continued the sale, and when Mr. Watson died in 1875, he bought the plates of the work (with others) from Mrs. Watson, and continued to advertise and to sell it until December 23rd, 1876. For the last forty years the book has thus been identified with Freethought, advertised by leading Freethinkers, published under the sanction of their names, and sold in the headquarters of Freethought literature. If during this long period the party has thus—without one word of protest—circulated an indecent work, the less we talk about Freethought morality the better; the work has been largely sold, and if Freethinkers have sold it—profiting by the sale—in mere carelessness, few words could be strong enough to brand the indifference which thus scattered obscenity broadcast over the land. The pamphlet has been withdrawn from circulation in consequence of the prosecution instituted against Mr. Charles Watts, but the question of its legality or illegality has not been tried; a plea of 'Guilty' was put in by the publisher, and the book, therefore, was not examined, nor was any judgment passed upon it; no

9 The Obscene Publications Act of 1857 was sponsored by Chief Justice Lord John Campbell (1779-1861); it granted official power to search for, confiscate, and destroy publications that had been formally denounced in a police court.

jury registered a verdict, and the judge stated that he had not read the work.

"We republish this pamphlet, honestly believing that on all questions affecting the happiness of the people, whether they be theological, political, or social, fullest right of free discussion ought to be maintained at all hazards. We do not personally endorse all that Dr. Knowlton says: his 'Philosophical Proem' seems to us full of philosophical mistakes, and—as we are neither of us doctors—we are not prepared to endorse his medical views; but since progress can only be made through discussion, and no discussion is possible where differing opinions are suppressed, we claim the right to publish all opinions, so that the public, enabled to see all sides of a question, may have the materials for forming a sound judgment.

"The alterations made are very slight; the book was badly printed, and errors of spelling and a few clumsy grammatical expressions have been corrected; the sub-title has been changed, and in one case four lines have been omitted, because they are repeated word for word further on. We have, however, made some additions to the pamphlet, which are in all cases kept distinct from the original text. Physiology has made great strides during the past forty years, and not considering it right to circulate erroneous physiology, we submitted the pamphlet to a doctor in whose accurate knowledge we have the fullest confidence, and who is widely known in all parts of the world as the author of the 'Elements of Social Science'; the notes signed 'G.R.' are written by this gentleman. References to other works are given in foot notes [sic] for the assistance of the reader, if he desires to study the subject further.

"Old Radicals will remember that Richard Carlile published a work entitled 'Every Woman's Book',¹⁰ which deals with the same subject, and advocates the same object, as Dr. Knowlton's pamphlet. R.D. Owen objected to the 'style and tone' of Carlile's 'Every Woman's Book' as not being 'in good taste', and he wrote his 'Moral Physiology', to do in America what Carlile's work was intended to do in England. This work of Carlile's was stigmatised as 'indecent' and 'immoral' because it advocated, as does Dr.

10 In 1826 Carlile reprinted a collection of his articles on "What Is Love?" as an anonymous pamphlet entitled *Every Woman's Book, or, What Is Love?*; it is interesting to note that when the young Bradlaugh was first on his own, he found temporary housing with Carlile's widow, Eliza Sharples.

Knowlton's, the use of preventive checks to population. In striving to carry on Carlile's work, we cannot expect to escape Carlile's reproach, but whether applauded or condemned we mean to carry it on, socially as well as politically and theologically.

"We believe, with the Rev. Mr. Malthus, that population has a tendency to increase faster than the means of existence, and that *some* checks must therefore exercise control over population; the checks now exercised are semi-starvation and preventible disease; the enormous mortality among the infants of the poor is one of the checks which now keeps down the population. The checks that ought to control population are scientific, and it is these which we advocate. We think it more moral to prevent the conception of children, than, after they are born, to murder them by want of food, air, and clothing. We advocate scientific checks to population, because, so long as poor men have large families, pauperism is a necessity, and from pauperism grow crime and disease. The wage which would support the parents and two or three children in comfort and decency is utterly insufficient to maintain a family of twelve or fourteen, and we consider it a crime to bring into the world human beings doomed to misery or to premature death. It is not only the hand-working classes which are concerned in this question. The poor curate, the struggling man of business, the young professional man, are often made wretched for life by their inordinately large families, and their years are passed in one long battle to live; meanwhile the woman's health is sacrificed and her life embittered from the same cause. To all of these, we point the way of relief and of happiness; for the sake of these we publish what others fear to issue, and we do it, confident that if we fail the first time, we shall succeed at last, and that the English public will not permit the authorities to stifle a discussion of the most important social question which can influence a nation's welfare.

"CHARLES BRADLAUGH.

"ANNIE BESANT."

We advertised the sale of the pamphlet in the *National Reformer* of March 25th (published March 22nd) in the following words:

FRUITS OF PHILOSOPHY. By CHARLES KNOWLTON, M.D.
PRICE SIXPENCE.

This Pamphlet will be republished on Saturday, March 24th, *in extenso*,¹¹ with some additional Medical Notes by a London Doctor of Medicine. It will be on sale at 28, Stonecutter Street, E.C., after 4 p.m. until close of shop. No one need apply before this time, as none will be on sale. Mr. Charles Bradlaugh and Mrs. Annie Besant will be in attendance from that hour, and will sell personally the first hundred copies.

FREETHOUGHT PUBLISHING COMPANY, 28, Stonecutter Street, E.C.

In addition to this we ourselves delivered copies on March 23rd to Mr. Martin, the Chief Clerk of the magistrates at Guildhall, to the officer in charge at the City Police Office in Old Jewry, and to the Solicitor for the City of London. With each pamphlet we handed in a notice that we should attend personally to sell the book on March 24th, at Stonecutter Street, from 4 to 5 p.m. These precautions were taken in order to force the authorities to prosecute us, and not any of our subordinates, if they prosecuted at all. The account of the first sale will interest many:

“On Saturday we went down to Stonecutter Street, accompanied by the Misses Bradlaugh and Mr. and Mrs. Touzeau Parris;¹² we arrived at No. 28 at three minutes to four, and found a crowd awaiting us. We promptly filled the window with copies of the pamphlet, as a kind of general notice of the sale within, and then opened the door. The shop was filled immediately, and in twenty minutes over 500 copies were sold. No one sold save Mr. Bradlaugh and myself, but Miss Bradlaugh sorted dozens with a skill that seemed to stamp her as intended by nature for the business, while her sister supplied change with a rapidity worthy of a bank clerk. Several detectives favored us with a visit, and one amused us by coming in and buying two copies from Mr. Bradlaugh, and then retiring gracefully; after an interval of perhaps a quarter of an hour he reappeared, and purchased one from me. Two police-

11 *In extenso* here means “in full”; this “Doctor of Medicine” is probably Dr. Charles Drysdale (see note XV.7).

12 Touzeau Parris was a former Unitarian minister who had recently joined the Freethought ranks; he and his wife, Annie, organized the first stage of the defense against publishing and selling the Knowlton pamphlet, which had provoked the Bristol police when a local bookseller, Henry Cook (who had already served two years for selling obscene literature), added some of his own illustrations to the Watts edition in 1876.

men outside made themselves useful; one patrolled the street calmly, and the other very kindly aided Norrish, Mr. Ramsey's co-worker, in his efforts to keep the stream flowing quietly, without too much pressure. Mr. Bradlaugh's voice was heard warningly from time to time, bidding customers not to crowd, and everything went well and smoothly, save that I occasionally got into fearful muddles in the intricacies of 'trade price';¹³ I disgusted one customer, who muttered roughly 'Ritchie', and who, when I gave him two copies, and put his shilling in the till, growled: 'I shan't take them'. I was fairly puzzled, till Mr. Bradlaugh enlightened me as to the difficulty, 'Ritchie' to me being unknown; it appeared that 'Ritchie', muttered by the buyer, meant that the copies were wanted by a bookseller of that name, and his messenger was irate at being charged full price. Friends from various parts appeared to give a kindly word; a number of the members of the Dialectical Society came in, and many were the congratulations and promises of aid in case of need. Several who came in offered to come forward as bail, and their names were taken by Mr. Parris. The buyer that most raised my curiosity was one of Mr. Watts' sons, who came in and bought seven copies, putting down only trade-price on the counter; no one is supplied at trade-price unless he buys to sell again, and we have all been wondering why Mr. Watts should intend to sell the Knowlton pamphlet, after he has proclaimed it to be obscene and indecent. At six o'clock the shutters were put up, and we gave up our amateur shop-keeping; our general time for closing on Saturday is 2 p.m., but we kept the shop open on Saturday for the special purpose of selling the Knowlton pamphlet. We sold about 800 copies, besides sending out a large number of country parcels, so that if the police now amuse themselves in seizing the work, they will entirely have failed in stopping its circulation.¹⁴

13 The trade price is its wholesale purchase cost, which presumes a mark-up for profit in resale.

14 Concurrent with the Obscene Publications Act, Parliament had passed the Post Office Act, which granted the post office the authority to open and appropriate such materials and prosecute the sender. AB's response to postal seizure of private-letter envelopes containing the Knowlton pamphlet can be seen in her letter to the *Times* of 24 May 1877, in which she announces, "When the House of Commons meets the whole of the Correspondence between the [Freethought Publishing] Company and the Post-Office will be moved for, by one of the Radical members, and an enquiry into Post-Office regulations will be asked for" (p. 119).

The pamphlet, during the present week, will have been sold over England and Scotland, and the only effect of the foolish police interference will be to have sold a large edition. We must add one word of thanks to them for the kindly aid given us by their gratuitous advertisement."

[I may note here, in passing, that we printed our edition verbatim from that issued by James Watson, not knowing that various editions were in circulation. It was thereupon stated by Mr. Watts that we had not reprinted the pamphlet for which he was prosecuted, so we at once issued another edition, printed from his own version.]

The help that flowed in to us from all sides was startling both in quantity and quality; a Defence Committee was quickly formed, consisting of the following persons:

"C.R. Drysdale, M.D., Miss Vickery, H.R.S. Dalton, B.A., W.J. Birch, M.A., J. Swaagman, Mrs. Swaagnian, P.A.V. Le Lubez, Mdme. Le Lubez, Miss Bradlaugh, Miss H. Bradlaugh, Mrs. Parris, T. Allsop, E. Truelove, Mark E. Marsden, F.A. Ford, Mrs. Fenwick Miller, G.N. Strawbridge, W.W. Wright, Mrs. Rennick, Mrs. Lowe, W. Bell, Thomas Slater, G.F. Forster, J. Scott, G. Priestley, J.W. White, J. Hart, H. Brooksbank, Mrs. Brooksbank, G. Middleton, J. Child, Ben. W. Elmy, Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, Touzeau Parris (Hon. Sec.), Captain R.H. Dyas, Thomas Roy (President of the Scottish Secular Union), R.A. Cooper, Robert Forder, William Wayham, Mrs. Elizabeth Wayham, Professor Emile Acolas (ancien Professeur de Droit Français à l'Université de Berne), W. Reynolds, C. Herbert, J.F. Haines, H. Rogers (President of the Trunk and Portmanteau Makers' Trade Society), Yves Guyot (Redacteur en chef du *Radical* et du *Bien Public*), W.J. Ramsey, J. Wilks, Mrs. Wilks, J.E. Symes, R. Martin, W.E. Adams, Mrs. Adams, John Bryson (President of the Northumberland Miners' Mutual Confident Association), Ralph Young, J. Grout, Mrs. Grout, General Cluseret, A. Talandier (Member of the Chamber of Deputies), J. Baxter Langley, LL.D., M.R.C.S., F.L.S."

Mrs. Fenwick Miller's letter of adhesion is worthy republication; it puts so tersely the real position:

"59, Francis Terrace, Victoria Park.

"March 31st.

"My dear Mrs. Besant,—I feel myself privileged in having the opportunity of expressing both to you and to the public, by giving

you my small aid to your defence, how much I admire the noble position taken up by Mr. Bradlaugh and yourself upon this attempt to suppress free discussion, and to keep the people in enforced ignorance upon the most important of subjects. It is shameful that you should have to do it, through the cowardice of the less important person who might have made himself a hero by doing as you now do, but was too weak for his opportunities. Since you have had to do it, however, accept the assurance of my warm sympathy, and my readiness to aid in any way within my power in your fight. Please add my name to your Committee. You will find a little cheque within: I wish I had fifty times as much to give.

“Under other circumstances, the pamphlet might well have been withdrawn from circulation, since its physiology is obsolete, and consequently its practical deductions to some extent unsound. But it must be everywhere comprehended that *this is not the point*. The book would have been equally attacked had its physiology been new and sound; the prosecution is against the right to issue a work upon the special subject, and against the freedom of the press and individual liberty.—Believe me, yours very faithfully,

F. FENWICK MILLER.”

Among the many received were letters of encouragement from General Garibaldi, M. Talandier, Professor Emile Acolas, and the Rev. S.D. Headlam.¹⁵

As we did not care to be hunted about London by the police, we offered to be at Stonecutter Street daily from 10 to 11 a.m.

15 Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807-82) was the Italian patriot and general who helped achieve national unity under the royal House of Savoy; he was enthusiastically received in England in 1864 (see Odger above). Pierre Theodore Talandier (1822-90) was a political exile from France from 1848 to 1870, during which time he worked as a translator and taught French at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst; he edited a radical periodical after his return to France in 1870. Prof. Emile Acolas (1826-91) was a constitutional jurist and author of *The Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1793: A Commentary* (1885); see Defense Committee membership list. Rev. Stewart Duckworth Headlam (1847-1924), a leading liberal Anglican, began a long-time alliance with AB when he constructively critiqued one of her *NR* columns in 1875; besides supporting her at the onset of the Knowlton defense, he spoke at the inaugural meeting of the Law and Liberty League in 1885, and they were both elected to the London School Board in 1888.

until we were arrested, and our offer was readily accepted. Friends who were ready to act as bail came forward in large numbers, and we arranged with some of them that they should be within easy access in case of need. There was a little delay in issuing the warrants for our arrest. A deputation from the Christian Evidence Society waited on Mr. (now Sir Richard) Cross,¹⁶ to ask that the Government should prosecute us, and he acceded to their request. The warrants were issued on April 3rd, and were executed on April 5th. The story of the arrest I take from my own article in the *National Reformer*, premising that we had been told that “the warrants were in the hands of Simmons”.

“Thursday morning found us again on our way to Stonecutter Street, and as we turned into it we were aware of three gentlemen regarding us affectionately from beneath the shelter of a ladder on the off-side of Farringdon Street. ‘That’s Simmons,’ quoth Mr. Bradlaugh, as we went in, and I shook my head solemnly, regarding ‘Simmons’ as the unsubstantial shadow of a dream. But as the two Misses Bradlaugh and myself reached the room above the shop, a gay—‘I told you so’, from Mr. Bradlaugh downstairs, announced a visit, and in another moment Mr. Bradlaugh came up, followed by the three unknown. ‘You know what we have come for,’ said the one in front; and no one disputed his assertion. Detective-Sergeant R. Outram was the head officer, and he produced his warrant at Mr. Bradlaugh’s request; he was accompanied by two detective officers, Messrs. Simmons and Williams. He was armed also with a search warrant, a most useful document, seeing that the last copy of the edition (of 5,000 copies) had been sold on the morning of the previous day, and a high pile of orders was accumulating downstairs, orders which we were unable to fulfill. Mr. Bradlaugh told him, with a twinkle in his eye, that he was too late, but offered him every facility for searching. A large packet of ‘Text Books’—left for that purpose by Norrish, if the truth were known—whose covers were the same color as those of the ‘Fruits’, attracted Mr. Outram’s attention, and he took off some of the brown paper wrapper, but found the goods unseizable. He took one copy of the ‘Cause of Woman’, by Ben

16 The Christian Evidence Society was founded in 1870 “to present fundamental truths of Christianity to inquirers”; Sir Richard Assheton Cross (1823-1914) was Home Secretary from 1874 to 1880.

Elmy,¹⁷ and wandered up and down the house seeking for goods to devour, but found nothing to reward him for his energy. Meanwhile we wrote a few telegrams and a note or two, and after about half-an-hour's delay, we started for the police-station in Bridewell Place, arriving there at 10.25. The officers, who showed us every courtesy and kindness consistent with the due execution of their duty, allowed Mr. Bradlaugh and myself to walk on in front, and they followed us across the roar of Fleet Street, down past Ludgate Hill Station, to the Police Office. Here we passed into a fair-sized room, and were requested to go into a funny iron-barred place; it was a large oval railed in, with a brightly polished iron bar running round it, the door closing with a snap. Here we stood while two officers in uniform got out their books; one of these reminded Mr. Bradlaugh of his late visits there, remarking that he supposed the 'gentleman you were so kind to will do you the same good turn now'. Mr. Bradlaugh dryly replied that he didn't think so, accepting service and giving it were two very different things. Our examination then began; names, ages, abodes, birth-places, number of children, color of hair and eyes, were all duly enrolled; then we were measured, and our heights put down; next we delivered up watches, purses, letters, keys—in fact emptied our pockets; then I was walked off by the housekeeper into a neighboring cell and searched—a surely most needless proceeding; it strikes me this is an unnecessary indignity to which to subject an uncondemned prisoner, except in cases of theft, where stolen property might be concealed about the person. It is extremely unpleasant to be handled, and on such a charge as that against myself a search was an absurdity. The woman was as civil as she could be, but, as she fairly enough said, she had no option in the matter. After this, I went back to the room and rejoined my fellow prisoner and we chatted peaceably with our guardians; they quite recognised our object in our proceedings, and one gave it as his opinion that we ought

17 Benjamin Elmy is less well-known today than his wife, Elizabeth Wolstenholme (1834-1913), whom he married in a civil ceremony in 1874 when she was five months pregnant; when some members of the Married Women's Property Committee felt she should resign under the circumstances, she was defended by Josephine Butler, with whom she had worked for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts; see Defense Committee membership list.

to have been summoned, and not taken by warrant. Taken, however, we clearly were, and we presently drove on to Guildhall,¹⁸ Mr. Outram in the cab with us, and Mr. Williams on the box.¹⁹

“At Guildhall, we passed straight into the court, through the dock, and down the stairs. Here Mr. Outram delivered us over to the gaoler, and the most uncomfortable part of our experiences began. Below the court are a number of cells, stone floored and whitewashed walled; instead of doors there are heavy iron gates, covered with thick close grating; the passages are divided here and there with similar strong iron gates, only some of which are grated. The rules of the place of course divided the sexes, so Mr. Bradlaugh and myself were not allowed to occupy the same cell; the gaoler, however, did the best he could for us, by allowing me to remain in a section of the passage which separated the men’s from the women’s cells, and by putting Mr. Bradlaugh into the first of the men’s. Then, by opening a little window in the thick wall, a grating was discovered, through which we could dimly see each other. Mr. Bradlaugh’s face, as seen from my side, scored all over with the little oblong holes in the grating reflected by the dull glimmer of the gas in the passage, was curious rather than handsome; mine was, probably, not more attractive. In this charming place we passed two hours-and-a-half, and it was very dull and very cold. We solaced ourselves, at first, by reading the *Secular Review*,²⁰ Mr. Bradlaugh tearing it into pages, and passing them one by one through the grating. By pushing on his side and pulling on mine, we managed to get them through the narrow holes. Our position when we read them was a strange

18 Guildhall, second only in size to Westminster Hall, has long been the center of civic government in London; it has served as the location for election of lord mayors and sheriffs, meetings of the Court of Common Council, and important trials, such as those for heresy and treason.

19 Riding “on the box” refers to the outside seating at the rear of a horse-drawn carriage. The box was located behind the passenger compartment; in the case of the post coach, the mail was held in the box, next to which a post office guard could stand. Sometimes passengers were also allowed to sit outside with the driver.

20 The *Secular Review* was one of many Freethought publications in competition with the *NR*; it was founded in 1876 by John Jacob Holyoake, who believed he could do more to advance Secularism by expressing himself independently than as a staff member of the *NR*; subsequently, it was headed in turn by Foote and Watts.

satire on one article (which I read with great pain), which expressed the writer's opinion that the book was so altered as not to be worth prosecuting. Neither the police nor the magistrate recognised any difference between the two editions. As I knew the second edition, taken from Mr. Watts', was almost ready for delivery as I read, I could not help smiling at the idea that no one 'had the courage' to reprint it.

"Mr. Bradlaugh paced up and down his limited kingdom, and after I had finished correcting an *N.R.*,²¹ I sometimes walked and sometimes sat, and we chatted over future proceedings, and growled at our long detention, and listened to names of prisoners being called, until we were at last summoned to 'go up higher,' and we joyfully obeyed. It was a strange sort of place to stand in, the dock of a police-court; the position struck one as really funny, and everyone who looked at us seemed to feel the same incongruity; officials, chief clerk, magistrate, all were equally polite, and Mr. Bradlaugh seemed to get his own way from the dock as much as everywhere else. The sitting magistrate was Alderman Figgins, a nice, kindly old gentleman, robed in marvellous, but not uncomely, garments of black velvet, purple, and dark fur. Below the magistrate, on either hand, sat a gentleman writing, one of whom was Mr. Martin, the chief clerk, who took the purely formal evidence required to justify the arrest. The reporters all sat at the right, and Mr. Touzeau Parris shared their bench, sitting on the corner nearest us. Just behind him Mr. Outram had kindly found seats for the two Misses Bradlaugh, who surveyed us placidly, and would, I am sure, had their duty called them to do so, have gladly and willingly changed places with us. The back of the court was filled with kindly faces, and many bright smiles greeted us; among the people were those who so readily volunteered their aid, those described by an official as 'a regular waggon-load of bail'. Their presence there was a most useful little demonstration of support, and the telegrams that kept dropping in also had their effect. 'Another of your friends, Mr. Bradlaugh,' quoth the chief clerk, as the fourth was handed to him, and I hear that the little buff envelopes continued to arrive all the afternoon. I need not here detail what happened in the court, as a full report by a shorthand writer appears in another part of the paper, and I only relate odds and ends. It amused me to see the broad grin which ran round when the

21 *N.R.*: Initials for the *National Reformer*.

detective was asked whether he had executed the seizure warrant, and he answered sadly that there was 'nothing to seize'. When bail was called for, Dr. Drysdale, Messrs. Swaagman, Truelove, and Bell were the first summoned, and no objections being raised to them, nor further securities asked for, these four gentlemen were all that were needed. We were then solemnly and severally informed that we were bound over in our own recognizances²² of £200 each to appear on Tuesday, April 17th, at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, to answer, etc., etc., etc., to which adjuration I only replied by a polite little bow. After all this we passed into a small room at one side, and there waited till divers papers were delivered unto us, and we were told to depart in peace. A number of people had gathered outside and cheered us warmly as we came out, one voice calling: 'Bravo! there's some of the old English spirit left yet'. Being very hungry (it was nearly three o'clock), we went off to luncheon, very glad that the warrant was no longer hanging over our heads, and on our way home we bought a paper announcing our arrest. The evening papers all contained reports of the proceedings, as did also the papers of the following morning. I have seen the *Globe*, *Standard*, *Daily News*, *Times*, *Echo*, *Daily Telegraph*,²³ and they all give perfectly fair reports of what took place. It is pleasant that they all seem to recognise that our reason for acting as we have done is a fair and honorable desire to test the right of publication."

XV.

The preliminary investigation before the magistrates at Guild-hall duly came on upon April 17th, the prosecution being conducted by Mr. Douglas Straight and Mr. F. Mead. The case was put by Mr. Straight with extreme care and courtesy, the learned counsel stating, "I cannot conceal from myself, or from those who instruct me, that everything has been done in accordance with fairness and *bona fides*¹ on the part of Mr. Bradlaugh and the

22 To be bound over in one's own recognizance is to be released by a magistrate with an obligation to reappear in court (or perform some other required action), usually with some sum of money pledged as a condition of forfeiture for non-compliance.

23 The *Globe*, *Standard*, *Daily News*, *Times*, *Echo*, and *Daily Telegraph* were all mainstream daily London newspapers.

1 *Bona fides*, from the Latin, here means in good faith and sincerity.

lady sitting by the side of him". Mr. Straight contended that the good intentions of a publisher could not be taken as proving that a book was not indictable, and laid stress on the cheapness of the work, "the price charged is so little as sixpence". Mr. Bradlaugh proved that there was no physiological statement in Knowlton, which was not given in far fuller detail in standard works on physiology, quoting Carpenter, Dalton, Acton, and others;² he showed that Malthus, Professor Fawcett,³ Mrs. Fawcett, and others, advocated voluntary limitation of the family, establishing his positions by innumerable quotations. A number of eminent men were in Court, subpœnaed to prove their own works, and I find on them the following note, written by myself at the time:—

"We necessarily put some of our medical and publishing witnesses to great inconvenience in summoning them into court, but those who were really most injured were the most courteous. Mr. Trübner,⁴ although suffering from a painful illness, and although we had expressed our willingness to accept in his stead some member of his staff, was present, kindly and pleasant as usual. Dr. Power,⁵ a most courteous gentleman, called away from an examination of some 180 young men, never thought of asking

- 2 Dr. William Benjamin Carpenter (1813-85), naturalist, physician, and professor, authored *Principles of Human Physiology, with Their Chief Applications to Psychology, Pathology, Therapeutics, Hygiene, and Forensic Medicine*, which reached its 5th edition in 1853; John Call Dalton (1825-89) wrote *A Treatise on Physiology and Hygiene: For Schools, Families, and Colleges* (1868); and Dr. William Acton (1813-75) was the author of *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life: Considered in Their Physiological, Social, and Moral Relations* (1865).
- 3 Prof. Henry Fawcett (1833-84), liberal statesman and political economist, was a strong supporter of the Co-operative movement, political and social equality of the sexes, and alleviation of the conditions of the poor, while his wife, Dame Millicent Garrett Fawcett (1847-1929), who shared his radical concerns, was a leader of the women's suffrage movement from its outset, as well as a staunch proponent of the Married Women's Property Act of 1882 (see Appendix C2).
- 4 Nicholas Trübner (1817-84) was head of a publishing house that was eventually incorporated, with several others, into the modern firm of Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- 5 Dr. Henry Power (1829-1911) was editor of the Carpenter text after its fifth edition and subsequently authored his own *Elements of Physiology* in 1884.

that he should be relieved from the citizen's duty, but only privately asked to be released as soon as possible. Dr. Parker⁶ was equally worthy of the noble profession to which he belonged, and said he did not want to stay longer than he need, but would be willing to return whenever wanted. Needless to say that Dr. Drysdale⁷ was there, ready to do his duty. Dr. W.B. Carpenter was a strange contrast to these; he was rough and discourteous in manner, and rudely said that he was not responsible for 'Human Physiology, by Dr. Carpenter', as his responsibility had ceased with the fifth edition. It seems a strange thing that a man of eminence, presumably a man of honor, should disavow all responsibility for a book which bears his name as author on the title-page. Clearly, if the 'Human Physiology' is not Dr. Carpenter's, the public is grossly deceived by the pretence that it is, and if, as Dr. Carpenter says, the whole responsibility rests on Dr. Power, then that gentleman should have the whole credit of that very useful book. It is not right that Dr. Carpenter should have all the glory and Dr. Power all the annoyance resulting from the work."

Among all the men we came into contact with during the trial, Dr. Carpenter and Professor Fawcett were the only two who shrank from endorsing their own written statements.

The presiding magistrate, Mr. Alderman Figgins, devoted himself gallantly to the unwonted task of wading through physiological text books, the poor old gentleman's hair sometimes standing nearly on end, and his composure being sadly ruffled when he found that Dr. Carpenter's florid treatise, with numerous illustrations of a, to him, startling character, was given to young boys and girls as a prize in Government examinations. He compared Knowlton with the work of Dr. Acton's submitted to him, and said despondingly that one was just the same as the other. At the end of the day the effect made on him by the

6 Dr. Parker (1823-90), professor of comparative anatomy at the Royal College of Surgeons, was known for his devotion to research and general avoidance of controversy, so his willingness to testify on behalf of the defendants is noteworthy.

7 Dr. Charles Robert Drysdale, already a member of the Defense Committee, was Senior Physician at the Metropolitan Free Hospital of London and brother of the author of the controversial *Elements of Social Science* once reviewed by Bradlaugh; he was himself the author of *The Population Question According to T.R. Malthus and J.S. Mill, Giving the Malthusian Theory of Over-Population* (1885).

defence was shown by his letting us go free without bail. Mr. Bradlaugh finished his defence at the next hearing of the case on April 19th, and his concluding remarks, showing the position we took, may well find their place here:

“The object of this book is to circulate amongst the masses of the poor and wretched (as far as my power will circulate it), and to seek to produce in their minds such prudential views on the subject of population as shall at least hinder some of the horrors to be witnessed amongst the starving. I have not put you to the trouble of hearing proof—even if I were, in this court, permitted to do so—of facts on the Population Question, because the learned counsel for the prosecution, with the frankness which characterises this prosecution, admitted there was the tendency on the part of animated nature to increase until checked by the absence or deficiency of the means of subsistence. This being so, some checks must step in; these checks must be either positive or preventive and prudential. What are positive checks? The learned counsel has told you what they are. They are war, disease, misery, starvation. They are in China—to take a striking instance—accompanied by habits so revolting that I cannot now allude to them.⁸ See the numbers of miserable starving children in the great cities and centres of population. Is it right to go to these people and say, ‘bring into the world children who cannot live’, who all their lives are prevented by the poverty-smitten frames of their parents, and by their own squalid surroundings, from enjoying almost every benefit of the life thrust on them! who inherit the diseases and adopt the crimes which poverty and misery have provided for them? The very medical works I have put in in this case show how true this is in too many cases, and if you read the words of Dr. Acton, crime is sometimes involved of a terrible nature which the human tongue governed by training shrinks from describing. We justly or erroneously believe that we are doing our duty in putting this information in the hands of the people, and we contest this case with no kind of bravado; the penalty we already have to pay is severe enough, for even while we are defending this, some portion of the public press is using words of terror-

8 The Chinese habits alluded to refer to female infanticide, a practice that continued into the early twentieth century and sporadically thereafter. Most recently, the one-child limit for most families has revived the practice, reasserting the age-old preference for male children in what has been labelled “gendercide.”

ism against the witnesses to be called, and is describing myself and my co-defendant in a fashion that I feel sure will find no sanction here, and that I hope will never occur again. We contest this because the advocacy of such views on population has been familiar to me for many years. The *Public Journal of Health*, edited by Dr. Hardwicke, the coroner for Central Middlesex, will show you that in 1868 I was known, in relation to this question, to men high in position in the land as original thinkers and political economists; that the late John Stuart Mill has left behind him, in his Autobiography, testimony concerning me on this subject, according unqualified praise to me for the views thereon which I had labored to disseminate; and that Lord Amberley thanked me, in a society of which we were then both associates, for having achieved what I had in bringing these principles to the knowledge of the poorer classes of the people.⁹ With taxation on every hand extending, with the cost of living increasing, and with wages declining—and, as to the last element I am reminded that recently I was called upon to arbitrate in a wages' dispute in the north of England for a number of poor men, and, having minutely scrutinised every side of the situation, was compelled to reduce their wages by 15 per cent., there having been already a reduction of 35 per cent. in the short space of some twenty months previously¹⁰—I say, with wages declining, with the necessities of life growing dearer and still dearer, and with the burden of rent and taxation ever increasing—if, in the presence of such a condition of life among the vast industrial and impoverished masses of this land, I am not to be allowed to tell them how best to prevent or to ameliorate the wretchedness of their lot—if, with all this, I may not speak to them of the true remedy, but the law is to step in and say to me, 'Your mouth is closed'; then, I ask you, what remedy is there remaining by which I am to deal with this awful misery?"

The worthy magistrate duly committed us for trial, accepting our own recognizances in £200 each to appear at the Central Crim-

9 For Mill's testimony, see Section XII; Lord John Amberley (1842-76), son of twice Prime Minister Lord John Russell, professed his atheist viewpoint in *An Analysis of Religious Belief* (1877), published by Trübner and Company.

10 I have not been able to ascertain the specific wage arbitration in the north that Bradlaugh was called upon to provide, although he may well be speaking in reference to the assistance he lent to the Yorkshire miners, especially in the Cleveland district, the previous year.

inal Court on May 7th. To the Central Criminal Court, however, we had not the smallest intention of going, if we could possibly avoid it, so Mr. Bradlaugh immediately took steps to obtain a writ of *certiorari* to remove the indictment to the Court of Queen's Bench.¹¹ On April 27th Mr. Bradlaugh moved for the writ before Lord Chief Justice Cockburn and Mr. Justice Mellor, and soon after he began his argument the judge stopped him, saying that he would grant the writ if, "upon looking at it we think its object is the legitimate one of promoting knowledge on a matter of human interest, then, lest there should be any miscarriage resulting from any undue prejudice, we might think it is a case for trial by a judge and a special jury."¹² I do not say it is so, mark, but only put it so, that if, on the other hand, science and philosophy are merely made the pretence of publishing a book which is calculated to arouse the passions of those who peruse it, then it follows that we must not allow the pretence to prevail, and treat the case otherwise than as one which may come before anybody to try. If we really think it is a fair question as to whether it is a scientific work or not, and its object is a just one, then we should be disposed to accede to your application, and allow it to be tried by a judge and special jury, and for that purpose allow the proceedings to be removed into this court. But, before we decide that, we must look into the book and form our own judgment as to the real object of the work."

11 For the Central Criminal Court, see note XIV.4; a writ of *certiorari* is issued out of a superior court to call up the records of an inferior court to ensure more speedy justice or to correct errors or irregularities; in this case, it amounts to a request for change of court venue. In 1877 the Court of the Queen's Bench was one of two divisions of the High Court (the other being Chancery); headed by the Lord Chief Justice, it heard cases within a wide range of contract law and personal injury, but it also had special responsibility as a supervisory court.

12 Sir Alexander Cockburn (1802-80) was already infamous for his ruling in the 1868 Hicklin case, in which he had determined that *The Confessional Unmasked*, published by the Protestant Electoral Union, was obscene because "the tendency of the matter ... is to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences, and into whose hands a publication of this sort may fall." Sir John Mellor (1809-87), Liberal MP for Nottingham and judge, had been a member of the special commission that tried the Fenian prisoners in Manchester in 1867; see Section V. A special jury consists of ten plus two talesmen, who are persons added to a jury, usually from those in and about the courthouse, in order to make up a deficiency in the available number of jurors normally summoned.

Two copies of the book were at once handed up to the Bench, and on April 30th the Court granted the writ, the Lord Chief Justice saying: "We have looked at the book which is the subject-matter of the indictment, and we think it really raises a fair question as to whether it is a scientific production for legitimate purposes, or whether it is what the indictment alleged it to be, an obscene publication." Further, the Court accepted Mr. Bradlaugh's recognizances for £400 for the costs of the prosecution.

Some, who have never read the Knowlton pamphlet, glibly denounce it as a filthy and obscene publication. The Lord Chief Justice of England and Mr. Justice Mellor, after reading it, decided to grant a writ which they had determined not to grant if the book had merely a veneer of science and was "calculated to arouse the passions". Christian bigotry has ever since 1877 striven to confound our action with the action of men who sell filth for gain, but only the shameless can persist in so doing when their falsehoods are plainly exposed, as they are exposed here.

The most touching letters from the poor came to us from all parts of the kingdom. One woman, who described herself as "very poor", and who had had thirteen children and was expecting another, wrote saying, "if you want money we will manage to send you my husband's pay one week". An army officer wrote thanking us, saying he had "a wife, seven children, and three servants to keep on 11s. 8d. a day; 5d. per head per diem keeps life in us. The rest for education and raiment." A physician wrote of his hospital experience, saying that it taught him that "less dangerous preventive checks to large families [than over-lactation¹³] should be taught to the lower classes". Many clergymen wrote of their experience among the poor, and their joy that some attempt was being made to teach them how to avoid over-large families, and letter after letter came to me from poor curates' wives, thanking me for daring to publish information of such vital importance. In many places the poor people taxed themselves so much a week for the cost of the defence, because they could not afford any large sum at once.

13 Over-lactation refers to the practice of breastfeeding for a year or more, commonly used as a method to avoid conception. Nursing as a contraceptive method is discussed by George Henry Napheys in *The Physical Life of Woman: Advice to the Maiden, Wife, and Mother* (1871), although William Goodell would later contend that over-lactation could result in various diseases for both the mother and child; see Goodell, *Lessons in Gynaecology* (1880).

As soon as we were committed for trial, we resigned our posts on the Executive of the National Secular Society, feeling that we had no right to entangle the Society in a fight which it had not authorised us to carry on. We stated that we did not desire to relinquish our positions, "but we do desire that the members of the Executive shall feel free to act as they think wisest for the interest of Freethought". The letter was sent to the branches of the Society, and of the thirty-three who answered all, except Burnley and Nottingham, refused to accept our resignation. On the Executive a very clever attempt was made to place us in a difficult position by stating that the resignations were not accepted, but that, as we had resigned, and as the Council had no power to renew appointments made by the Conference, it could not invite us to resume our offices. This ingenious proposal was made by Mr. George Jacob Holyoake, who all through the trial did his best to injure us, apparently because he had himself sold the book long before we had done so, and was anxious to shield himself from condemnation by attacking us. His resolution was carried by five votes to two. Mr. Haines and Mr. Ramsey, detecting its maliciousness, voted against it. The votes of the Branches, of course, decided the question overwhelmingly in our favor, but we declined to sit on the Executive with such a resolution standing, and it was then carried—Mr. Holyoake and Mr. Watts only voting against—that "This Council acknowledge the consideration shown by Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant for the public repute of the National Secular Society by tendering their resignations, and whilst disclaiming all responsibility for the book, 'Fruits of Philosophy', decline to accept such resignations". So thoroughly did we agree that the Society ought not to be held responsible for our action, that we published the statement: "The Freethought party is no more the endorser of our Malthusianism than it is of our Republicanism, or of our advocacy of Woman Suffrage, or of our support of the North in America, or of the part we take in French politics".¹⁴ I may add that at the Nottingham Conference Mr. Bradlaugh was re-elected President with only four dis-

14 Actually, the NSS was the first political organization in England to make women's suffrage an open policy objective, and many of its members had shown support for the Union in the American Civil War; AB and Bradlaugh, however, did number among their personal friends and supporters several key players in French politics, and they are here declaring their independence of the NSS in that regard (see Defense Committee listing).

sentients, the party being practically unanimous in its determination to uphold a Free Press.

The next stage of the prosecution was the seizure of our book packets and letters in the Post-office by the Tory Government. The "Freethinker's Text Book",¹⁵ the *National Reformer* and various pamphlets were seized, as well as the "Fruits of Philosophy", and sealed letters were opened. Many meetings were held denouncing the revival of a system of Government *espionage* which, it was supposed, had died out in England, and so great was the commotion raised that a stop was soon put to this form of Government theft, and we recovered the stolen property. On May 15th Mr. Edward Truelove was attacked for the publication of Robert Dale Owen's "Moral Physiology", and of a pamphlet entitled "Individual, Family, and National Poverty",¹⁶ and as both were pamphlets dealing with the Population Question, Mr. Truelove's case was included in the general defence.

Among the witnesses we desired to subpoena was Charles Darwin, as we needed to use passages from his works; he wrote back a most interesting letter, telling us that he disagreed with preventive checks to population on the ground that over-multiplication was useful, since it caused a struggle for existence in which only the strongest and the ablest survived, and that he doubted whether it was possible for preventive checks to serve as well as positive. He asked us to avoid calling him if we could: "I have been for many years much out of health, and have been forced to give up all society or public meetings, and it would be great suffering to me to be a witness in court.... If it is not asking too great a favor, I should be greatly obliged if you would inform me what you decide, as apprehension of the coming exertion would prevent the rest which I require doing me much good." Needless to add that I at once wrote to Mr. Darwin that we

15 Part I of *The Freethinker's Text Book* (1876) was written by Bradlaugh; AB's contribution was Part II, "On Christianity" ("Christianity: Its Evidences Unreliable"; "Its Origins Pagan"; "Its Morality Fallible"; and "Condemned by Its History"). See also note XIV.14 regarding the Post Office Act and AB's 24 May 1877 letter to the *Times*, in which she excerpts her recent letter to the Postmaster General, stating, "There seems to be no law in England under which private letters may be opened in order to ascertain their contents...."

16 It is reasonable to suspect that the anonymous "Doctor of Medicine" who wrote "Individual, Family, and National Poverty" is none other than "G.R.," namely Dr. George Drysdale.

would not call him, but his gentle courtesy has always remained a pleasant memory to me. Another kind act was that of the famous publisher, Mr. H.G. Bohn,¹⁷ who volunteered himself as a witness, and drew attention to the fact that every publisher of serious literature was imperilled by the attempt to establish a police censorship.

The trial commenced on June 18th, in the Court of Queen's Bench at Westminster, before the Lord Chief Justice of England and a special jury. Sir Hardinge Giffard,¹⁸ the Solicitor-General of the Tory Government, Mr. Douglas Straight, and Mr. Mead, were the prosecuting counsel. The special jury consisted of the following: Alfred Upward, Augustus Voelcker, Captain Alfred Henry Waldey, Thomas Richard Walker, Robert Wallace, Edmund Waller, Arthur Walter, Charles Alfred Walter, John Ward, Arthur Warre; the two talesmen,¹⁹ who were afterwards added to make up the number, were George Skinner and Charles Wilson.

The Solicitor-General made a bitter and violent speech, full of party hate and malice, endeavoring to prejudice the jury against the work by picking out bits of medical detail and making profuse apologies for reading them, and shuddering and casting up his eyes with all the skill of a finished actor. For a man accustomed to Old Bailey practice he was really marvellously easily shocked; a simple physiological fact brought him to the verge of tears, while the statement that people often had too large families covered him with such modest confusion that he found it hard to continue his address. It fell to my lot to open the defence, and to put the general line of argument by which we justified the publication; Mr. Bradlaugh dealt with the defence of the book as a medical work until the Lord Chief Justice suggested that there was no "redundancy of details, or anything more than it is necessary for a medical man to know"—and strongly urged that the knowledge given by the pamphlet was absolutely necessary for the poor. We called as witnesses for the defence Miss Alice

17 Henry George Bohn (1796-1884), a retired publisher of international acclaim, was the final witness for the defense; Bohn's Scientific Series had published Carpenter's *Animal Physiology* (1859), and Bohn was able to testify about the wide circulation of more explicit physiological works by De la Motte Ligniac and Nicolas Venette, among others.

18 Sir Hardinge Stanley Giffard, Lord Halsbury (1825-1921), later served twice as Lord High Chancellor.

19 See note XV.12 (above).

Vickery²⁰—the first lady who passed the examination of the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, and who has since passed the examinations qualifying her to act as a physician—Dr. Charles Drysdale, and Mr. H.G. Bohn. Dr. Drysdale bore witness to the medical value of the pamphlet, stating that “considering it was written forty years ago....the writer must have been a profound student of Physiology, and far advanced in the medical science of his time”. “I have always considered it an excellent treatise, and I have found among my professional brethren that they have had nothing to say against it.” Mr. Bohn bore witness that he had published books which “entirely covered your book, and gave a great deal more.” Mr. Bradlaugh and myself then severally summed up our case, and the Solicitor-General made a speech for the prosecution very much of the character of his first one, doing all he could to inflame the minds of the jury against us. The Lord Chief Justice, to quote a morning paper, “summed up strongly for an acquittal”. He said that “a more ill-advised and more injudicious proceeding in the way of a prosecution was probably never brought into a Court of Justice”. He described us as “two enthusiasts, who have been actuated by the desire to do good in a particular department of Society”. He bade the jury be careful “not to abridge the full and free right of public discussion, and the expression of public and private opinion on matters which are interesting to all, and materially affect the welfare of society.” Then came an admirable statement of the law of population, and of his own view of the scope of the book which I present in full as our best justification.

“The author, Doctor Knowlton, professes to deal with the subject of population. Now, a century ago a great and important question of political economy was brought to the attention of the scientific and thinking world by a man whose name everybody is acquainted with, namely, Malthus. He stated for the first time a theory which astonished the world, though it is now accepted as an irrefragable truth, and has since been adopted by economist

20 Alice Vickery (1844-1929), another member of the Defense Committee, had trained as a midwife in Paris and could testify to instances of women who nursed their babies for up to two years to (erroneously) avoid becoming pregnant again; she succeeded her husband, Charles Robert Drysdale, as president of the Malthusian League upon his death in 1907. The Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain was founded in 1841 by a group of leading London chemists and druggists.

after economist. It is that population has a strong and marked tendency to increase faster than the means of subsistence afforded by the earth, or that the skill and industry of man can produce for the support of life. The consequence is that the population of a country necessarily includes a vast number of persons upon whom poverty presses with a heavy and sad hand. It is true that the effects of overpopulation are checked to a certain extent by those powerful agencies which have been at work since the beginning of the world. Great pestilences, famines, and wars have constantly swept away thousands from the face of the earth, who otherwise must have contributed to swell the numbers of mankind. The effect, however, of this tendency to increase faster than the means of subsistence, leads to still more serious evils amongst the poorer classes of society. It necessarily lowers the price of labor by reason of the supply exceeding the demand. It increases the dearth of provisions by making the demand greater than the supply, and produces direful consequences to a large class of persons who labor under the evils, physical and moral, of poverty. You find it, as described by a witness called yesterday, in the overcrowding of our cities and country villages, and the necessarily demoralising effects resulting from that overcrowding. You have heard of the way in which women—I mean child-bearing women—are destroyed by being obliged to submit to the necessities of their position before they are fully restored from the effects of child-birth, and the effects thus produced upon the children by disease and early death. That these are evils—evils which, if they could be prevented, it would be the first business of human charity to prevent—there cannot be any doubt. That the evils of over-population are real, and not imaginary, no one acquainted with the state of society in the present day can possibly deny. Malthus suggested, years ago and his suggestion has been supported by economists since his time, that the only possible way of keeping down population was by retarding marriage to as late a period as possible, the argument being that the fewer the marriages the fewer would be the people. But another class of theorists say that that remedy is bad, and possibly worse than the disease, because, although you might delay marriage, you cannot restrain those instincts which are implanted in human nature, and people will have the gratification and satisfaction of passions powerfully implanted, if not in one way, in some other way. So you have the evils of prostitution substituted for the evils of over-population. Now, what says Dr. Knowlton? There being this choice of evils—there being this

unquestioned evil of over-population which exists in a great part of the civilised world—is the remedy proposed by Malthus so doubtful that probably it would lead to greater evils than the one which it is intended to remedy?²¹ Dr. Knowlton suggests—and here we come to the critical point of this inquiry—he suggests that, instead of marriage being postponed, it shall be hastened. He suggests that marriage shall take place in the hey-day of life, when the passions are at their highest, and that the evils of over-population shall be remedied by persons, after they have married, having recourse to artificial means to prevent the procreation of a numerous offspring, and the consequent evils, especially to the poorer classes, which the production of a too numerous offspring is certain to bring about. Now, gentlemen, that is the scope of the book. With a view to make those to whom these remedies are suggested understand, appreciate, and be capable of applying them, he enters into details as to the physiological circumstances connected with the procreation of the species. The Solicitor-General says—and that was the first proposition with which he started—that the whole of this is a delusion and a sham. When Knowlton says that he wishes that marriage should take place as early as possible—marriage being the most sacred and holy of all human relations—he means nothing of the kind, but means and suggests, in the sacred name of marriage, illicit intercourse between the sexes, or a kind of prostitution. Now, gentlemen, whatever may be your opinion about the propositions contained in this work, when you come to weigh carefully the views of this undoubted physician and would-be philosopher, I think you will agree with me that to say that he meant to depreciate marriage for the sake of prostitution, and that all he says about marriage is only a disguise, and intended to impress upon the mind sentiments of an entirely different character for the gratification of passion, otherwise than by marriage, is a most unjust accusation. (Applause in court.) I must say that I believe that every word he says about marriage being a desirable institution, and every word he says with reference to the enjoyments and happiness it engenders, is said as honestly and truly as anything probably ever uttered by

21 See Thomas à Kempis (c. 1380-1471), *Of the Imitation of Christ*: “Of the two evils the lesser is always to be chosen” (III.xii.2). Chief Justice Cockburn is here playing on the expression that compares the greater with the lesser of two evils—only in this case he projects that “this choice of evils” may perhaps be unnecessary if the concept of some kind of birth control can intervene.

any man. I can only believe that when the Solicitor-General made that statement he had not half studied the book. But I pass that by. I come to the plain issue before you. Knowlton goes into physiological details connected with the functions of the generation and procreation of children. The principles of this pamphlet, with its details, are to be found in greater abundance and distinctness in numerous works to which your attention has been directed, and, having these details before you, you must judge for yourselves whether there is anything in them which is calculated to excite the passions of man and debase the public morals. If so, every medical work is open to the same imputation.”

The Lord Chief Justice then dealt with the question whether conjugal prudence was in itself immoral, and pointed out to the jury that the decision of this very serious question was in their hands:

“A man and woman may say, ‘We have more children than we can supply with the common necessities of life: what are we to do? Let us have recourse to this contrivance.’²² Then, gentlemen, you should consider whether that particular course of proceeding is inconsistent with morality, whether it would have a tendency to degrade and deprave the man or woman. The Solicitor-General, while doubtless admitting the evils and mischiefs of excessive population, argues that the checks proposed are demoralising in their effects, and that it is better to bear the ills we have than have recourse to remedies having such demoralising results. These are questions for you, twelve thinking men, probably husbands and fathers of families, to consider and determine.²³ That the defendants honestly believe that the evils that this work would remedy, arising from over-population and poverty, are so great that these checks may be resorted to as a remedy for the evils, and as bettering the condition of humanity, although there might be things to

22 The chief birth control device recommended in 1877 was the vaginal sponge, considered most likely of success because it depended on female initiative.

23 Of course, this could be a jury of only “twelve thinking men” because women in Britain would not obtain the vote or be qualified for jury duty until 1928 (they gained the right to run for Parliament in 1919, though they could not yet be elected by the full complement of their “peers” until women between the ages of twenty-one and thirty could vote as well).

be avoided, if it were possible to avoid them, and yet remedy the evils which they are to prevent—that such is the honest opinion of the defendants, we, who have read the book, and who have heard what they have said, must do them the justice of believing. I agree with the Solicitor-General if, with a view to what is admitted to be a great good, they propose something to the world, and circulate it especially among the poorer classes, if they propose something inconsistent with public morals, and tending to destroy the domestic purity of women, that it is not because they do not see the evils of the latter, while they see the evils of the former, that they must escape; if so, they must abide the consequences of their actions, whatever may have been their motive. They say, ‘We are entitled to submit to the consideration of the thinking portion of mankind the remedies which we propose for these evils. We have come forward to challenge the inquiry whether this is a book which we are entitled to publish.’ They do it fairly, I must say, and in a very straightforward manner they come to demand the judgment of the proper tribunal. You must decide that with a due regard and reference to the law, and with an honest and determined desire to maintain the morals of mankind. But, on the other hand, you must carefully consider what is due to public discussion, and with an anxious desire not, from any prejudiced view of this subject, to stifle what may be a subject of legitimate inquiry. But there is another view of this subject, that Knowlton intended to reconcile with marriage the prevention of over-population. Upon the perusal of this work, I cannot bring myself to doubt that he honestly believed that the remedies he proposed were less evils than even celibacy or over-population on the one hand, or the prevention of marriage on the other hand—in that honesty of intention I entirely concur. But whether, in his desire to reconcile marriage with a check on over-population, he did not overlook one very important consideration connected with that part of society which should abuse it, is another and a very serious consideration.”

When the jury retired there was but one opinion in court, namely, that we had won our case. But they were absent for an hour and thirty-five minutes, and we learned afterwards that several were anxious to convict, not so much because of the book as because we were Freethinkers. At last they agreed to a compromise, and the verdict delivered was: “We are unanimously of opinion that the book in question is calculated to deprave public morals, but at the same time we entirely exonerate the defendants from any corrupt motives in publishing it.”

The Lord Chief Justice looked troubled, and said gravely that he would have to direct them to return a verdict of guilty on such a finding. The foreman, who was bitterly hostile, jumped at the chance without consulting his colleagues, some of whom had turned to leave the box, and thus snatched a technical verdict of “guilty” against us. Mr. George Skinner, of 27, Great Chapel Gate, Westminster, wrote to me on the following day to say that six of the jurymen did not consent to the verdict of “guilty”, and that they had agreed that if the judge would not accept the verdict as handed in they would then retire again, and that they would never have given a verdict of guilty; but the stupid men had not the sense to speak out at the right time, and their foreman had his way. The Lord Chief Justice at once set us free to come up for judgment on that day week, June 28th—the trial had lasted until the 21st—and we went away on the same recognizances given before by Mr. Bradlaugh, an absolutely unprecedented courtesy to two technically “convicted prisoners.”²⁴

XVI.

The week which intervened between the verdict of the jury and the day on which we were ordered to appear in Court to receive sentence was spent by us in arranging all our affairs, and putting everything in train for our anticipated absence. One serious question had to be settled, but it did not need long consideration. What were we to do about the Knowlton pamphlet? We promptly decided to ignore the verdict and to continue the sale. Recognising that the fact of this continued sale would be brought up against us in Court and would probably seriously increase our sentence, we none the less considered that as we had commenced the fight we were bound to maintain it, and we went on with the sale as before.

On June 28th we attended the Court of Queen’s Bench to receive judgment, the Lord Chief Justice and Mr. Justice Mellor being on the Bench. We moved to quash the indictment, on arrest

24 The author’s footnote reads: “A Report of the Trial can be obtained from the Freethought Publishing Company, price 5s. It contains an exact report of all that was said and done.” The “specially reported” full transcript of “The Queen v. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant” before the High Court of Justice of the Queen’s Bench Division covered the five-day trial, indictment, and sentencing (18-28 June 1877).

of judgment, and for a new trial, the first on the ground that the indictment did not set out the words complained of. The judges were against us on this, but it is interesting to note that the Lord Chief Justice remarked that “the language of the book is not open to any particular objection”. I argued that the jury, having exonerated us from any corrupt motive, could not be regarded as having found us guilty on an indictment which charged us with a corrupt motive: the Lord Chief Justice held that “in the unnecessary and superfluous part of the indictment, there is no Judgment against you”, and refused to believe that anyone would be found afterwards so base as to accuse us of evil intent, because of the formal words of the indictment, the jury having acquitted us of any corrupt intention. The judge unfortunately imputed to others his own uprightness, and we have found many—among them Sir W.T. Charley,¹ the present Common Sergeant—vile enough to declare what he thought impossible, that we were found guilty of wilfully corrupting the morals of the people. The judges decided against us on all the points raised, but it is due to them to say that in refusing to quash the indictment, as Mr. Bradlaugh asked, they were misled by the misrepresentation of an American case by Sir Hardinge Giffard, and, to quote the words of the Lord Chief Justice, they sheltered themselves “under the decisions of the American Courts, and left this matter to be carefully gone into by the Court of Error”.²

The question of sentence then arose, and two affidavits were put in, one by a reporter of the *Morning Advertiser*,³ named

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- 1 Sir William Thomas Charley (1833-1904) was a routine lawyer and Conservative MP who loyally supported Disraeli and vigorously defended the Church of England; his 1878 election as Common Sergeant, the legal official who enforces the court's judgment, came as somewhat of a surprise to his peers and led to abolishing the right of the Court of Common Council to make appointments to that office.
 - 2 The Court of Error addresses mistakes in the proceedings of a court of record in matters of law or fact; thus, a writ of error seeks redress for such an incorrect decision through a mandatory process, in this case on the technical ground that the words relied upon by the prosecution had not been exactly declared.
 - 3 The *Morning Advertiser*, founded in 1794, was one of many London daily newspapers; it is worth noting at this point that the trial had been widely reported in the periodical press, and even those newspapers that expressed some hostility toward the defendants contributed to the more open dialogue on the subject of birth control (see “The Plan of the Campaign” reproduced later in this section).

Lysaght. This individual published in the *Advertiser* a very garbled report of a meeting at the Hall of Science on the previous Sunday, evidently written to anger the Lord Chief Justice, and used by Sir Hardinge Giffard with the same object. In one thing, however, it was accurate, and that was in stating that we announced our intention to continue the sale of the book. On this arose an argument with the Lord Chief Justice; he pointed out that we did not deny that the circulation of the book was going on, and we assented that it was so. It was almost pathetic to see the judge, angry at our resolution, unwilling to sentence us, but determined to vindicate the law he administered. "The question is," he urged, "what is to be the future course of your conduct? The jury have acquitted you of any intention to deliberately violate the law; and that, although you did publish this book, which was a book that ought not to have been published, you were not conscious of the effect it might have, and had no intention to violate the law. That would induce the Court, if it saw a ready submission on your part, to deal with the case in a very lenient way. The jury having found that it was a violation of the law, but with a good motive or through ignorance, the Court, in awarding punishment upon such a state of things, would, of course, be disposed to take a most indulgent view of the matter. But if the law has been openly set at defiance, the matter assumes a very different aspect, and it must be dealt with as a very grave and aggravated case." We could not, however, pledge ourselves to do anything more than stop the sale pending the appeal on the writ of error which we had resolved to go for. "Have you anything to say in mitigation?" was the judge's last appeal; but Mr. Bradlaugh answered: "I respectfully submit myself to the sentence of the Court"; and I: "I have nothing to say in mitigation of punishment".

The sentence and the reason for its heavy character have been so misrepresented, that I print here, from the shorthand report taken at the time, the account of what passed:—

"The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE, after having conferred for some minutes with Mr. Justice Mellor, said: The case has now assumed a character of very, very grave importance. We were prepared, if the defendants had announced openly in this Court that having acted in error as the jury found—of which finding I think they are entitled to the benefit—but still having been, after a fair and impartial trial, found by the jury guilty of doing of that which was an offence against the law, they were ready to submit

to the law and to do everything in their power to prevent the further publication and circulation of a work which has been declared by the jury to be a work calculated to deprave public morals, we should have been prepared to discharge them on their own recognizances to be of good behavior in the future. But we cannot help seeing in what has been said and done pending this trial, and since the verdict of the jury was pronounced, that the defendants, instead of submitting themselves to the law, have set it at defiance by continuing to circulate this book. That being so I must say that that which before was an offence of a comparatively slight character—looking to what the jury have found in reference to the contention of the defendants—now assumes the form of a most grave and aggravated offence, and as such we must deal with it. The sentence is that you, Charles Bradlaugh, and you, Annie Besant, be imprisoned for the term of six calendar months; that you each pay a fine of £200 to the Queen; and that you enter further into your own recognizances in a sum of £500 each to be of good behavior for the term of two years; and I tell you at the same time that you will not be of ‘good behavior’ and will be liable to forfeit that sum if you continue to publish this book. No persuasion or conviction on your part that you are doing that which is morally justifiable can possibly warrant you in violating the law or excuse you in doing so. No one is above the law; all owe obedience to the law from the highest to the lowest, and if you choose to set yourself at defiance against the law—to break it and defy it—you must expect to be dealt with accordingly. I am very sorry indeed that such should be the result, but it is owing to your being thus contumacious,⁴ notwithstanding that you have had a fair trial, and the verdict of a competent jury, which ought to have satisfied you that you ought to abstain from doing what has been clearly demonstrated and shown to be wrong.

“MR. BRADLAUGH: Would your lordship entertain an application to stay execution⁵ of the sentence?

“THE LORD CHIEF JUSTICE: Certainly not. On consideration, if you will pledge yourselves unreservedly that there shall be no repetition of the publication of the book, at all events, until the

4 “Contumacious” means perverse in resisting authority or stubbornly disobedient.

5 A stay of execution of a sentence is a stopping or suspension of the judicial procedure of enforcing a court’s sentence, which can be accomplished on notice of intention to appeal.

Court of Appeal⁶ shall have decided contrary to the verdict of the jury and our judgment; if we can have that positive pledge, and you will enter into your recognizances that you will not avail yourselves of the liberty we extend to continue the publication of this book, which it is our bounden duty to suppress, or do our utmost to suppress, we may stay execution; but we can show no indulgence without such a pledge.

“Mr. BRADLAUGH: My lord, I meant to offer that pledge in the fullest and most unreserved sense, because, although I have my own view as to what is right, I also recognise that the law having pronounced sentence, that is quite another matter so far as I, as a citizen, am concerned. I do not wish to ask your lordship for a favor without yielding to the Court during the time that I take advantage of its indulgence.

“The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE: I wish you had taken this position sooner.

“Mr. BRADLAUGH: If the sentence goes against us, it is another matter; but if you should consent to give us time for the argument of this writ of error, we would bind ourselves during that time. I should not like your lordship to be induced to grant this request on the understanding that in the event of the ultimate decision being against me I should feel bound by that pledge.

“The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE: I must do you the justice to say that throughout the whole of this battle your conduct has been straightforward since you took it up.

“Mr. BRADLAUGH: I would not like your lordship to think that, in the event of the ultimate decision being against us, there was any sort of pledge. I simply meant that the law having pronounced against us, if your lordship gives us the indulgence of fighting it in the higher Court, no sort of direct or indirect advantage shall be taken of the indulgence.

“The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE: You will not continue the publication?

“Mr. BRADLAUGH: Not only will I stop the circulation of the book myself, but I will do all in my power to prevent other people circulating it.

“The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE: Then you can be discharged on your own recognizances for £100, ‘to be of good behavior,’ which you will understand to mean, that you will desist from the publi-

6 The Court of Appeal determines the legal proceeding when a case is moved from a lower to higher court for rehearing.

cation of this work until your appeal shall have been heard, and will engage to prosecute the appeal without delay.

“Mr. BRADLAUGH: Certainly; until the present, I have undoubtedly circulated the book. Although there is a blunder in the affidavits I do not disguise the matter of fact. I shall immediately put the thing under my own control, and I will at once lock up every copy in existence, and will not circulate another copy until the appeal is decided.

“Mr. JUSTICE MELLOW: It must be that you will really, to the best of your ability, prevent the circulation of this book until this matter has been determined.

“The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE: And what Mr. Bradlaugh says, I understand that you, Mrs. Besant, also assent to?

“Mrs. BESANT: Yes, that is my pledge until the writ of error has been decided. I do not want to give a pledge which you may think was not given honestly. I will give my pledge, but it must be understood that the promise goes no further than that decision.

“Mr. JUSTICE MELLOR: You will abstain yourself from circulating the book, and, so far as you can, suppress its circulation?

“Mr. BRADLAUGH: Every copy that is unsold shall be at once put under lock and key until the decision of the case.

“The SOLICITOR-GENERAL: My lord, I think there should be no misunderstanding upon this; I understand that the defendants have undertaken that during the pendency⁷ of the appeal this book shall not be circulated at all. But if the decision should be against them they are under no pledge not to publish.

“Mr. BRADLAUGH: I hope your lordship will not ask us what we shall do in future.

“The LORD CHIEF JUSTICE: We have meted out the amount of punishment upon the assumption—there being no assertion to the contrary, but rather an admission—that they do intend to set the law at defiance. If we had understood that they were prepared to submit themselves to the law, we should have been disposed to deal with them in the most indulgent manner; but as we understood that they did not intend this, we have meted out to them such a punishment as we hope, when undergone, will have a deterrent effect upon them, and may prevent other people offending in like manner. We have nothing to do with what may happen after the defendants obtain a judgment in their favor, if

7 “Pendency” refers to the state of being pending, or in continuance, while awaiting a decision.

they do so, or after the sentence is carried out, if they do not. Our sentence is passed, and it will stand, subject only to this, that we stay execution until a writ of error may be disposed of, the defendants giving the most unqualified and unreserved pledge that they will not allow another copy of the book to be sold.

“Mr. BRADLAUGH: Quite so, my lord; quite so.”

We were then taken into custody, and went down to the Crown Office⁸ to get the form for the recognizances, the amount of which, £100, after such a sentence, was a fair proof of the view of the Court as to our good faith in the whole matter. As a married woman, I was unable to give recognizances, being only a chattel, not a person cognisable by law; the Court mercifully ignored this—or I should have had to go to prison—and accepted Mr. Bradlaugh’s sole recognizance as covering us both. It further inserted in the sentence that we were to be placed in the First Class of Misdemeanants”,⁹ but as the sentence was never executed, we did not profit by this alleviation.

The rest of the story of the Knowlton pamphlet is soon told. We appeared in the Court of Appeal on January 29th, 30th, and 31st, 1878. Mr. Bradlaugh argued the case, I only making a brief speech, and on February 12th the Court, composed of Lords Justices Bramwell, Brett, and Cotton, gave judgment in our favor and quashed the indictment.¹⁰ Thus we triumphed all along the line; the jury acquitted us of all evil motive, and left us morally unstained; the Court of Appeal quashed the indictment, and set us legally free. None the less have the ignorant, the malicious, and

8 The Crown Office was the office of the Court of the Queen’s Bench in which procedures took place in matters related to the prerogative of filing writs of error.

9 First Class Misdemeanants are considered guilty or convicted of a crime less serious than a felony, and hence not punishable by imprisonment.

10 The defendants were fortunate in their Court of Appeal: George William Bramwell, Baron Bramwell (1808-92), later became a champion of the Liberty and Property Defence League; he was recognized for his accuracy and lucidity. William Baliol Brett, Viscount Esher (1815-99), succeeded Sir George Jessel upon his death in 1883 as Master of the Rolls; he was known for his common sense and ability to sort out the technicalities brought before him. Sir Henry Cotton (1821-92) was Standing Counsel to the University of Oxford before he was appointed Lord Justice of Appeal in 1877; he was noted for his learning, precision, and courtesy.

the brutal, used this trial and sentence against us as a proof of moral obliquity, and have branded us as “vendors of obscene books” on this sole ground.

With the decision of the Court of Appeal our pledge not to sell the Knowlton pamphlet came to an end, and we at once recommenced the sale. The determination we came to was announced in the *National Reformer* of March 3rd, and I reprint here the statement I wrote at the time in Mr. Bradlaugh’s name as well as my own.

“THE PLAN OF THE CAMPAIGN.

“THE first pitched battle of the new campaign for the Liberty of the Press has, as all our readers know, ended in the entire defeat of the attacking army, and in the recapture of the position originally lost. There is no conviction—of ours—registered against the Knowlton Pamphlet, the whole of the proceedings having been swept away; and the prosecutors are left with a large sum out of pocket, and no one any the worse for all their efforts. The banker’s account of the unknown prosecutor shows a long and melancholy catalogue of expenses, and there is no glory and no success to balance them on the other side of the ledger. On the contrary, our prosecutors have advertised the attacked pamphlet, and circulated it by thousands and by hundreds of thousands; they have caused it to be reprinted in Holland and in America, and have spread it over India, Australia, New Zealand, and the whole continent of Europe; they have caused the Population Question to be discussed, both at home and abroad, in the press and in the public meeting; they have crammed the largest halls in England and Scotland to listen to the preaching of Malthusianism; they have induced the publication of a modern pamphlet on the question which is selling by thousands; they have enormously increased the popularity of the defendants, and made new friends for them in every class of society; in the end, Knowlton is being circulated as vigorously as ever, and since the case was decided more copies have been sold than would have been disposed of in ten years at the old rate of sale. Truly, our prosecutors must feel delighted at the results of their labors.

“So much for the past: what as to the future? Some, fancying we should act as they themselves would do under the like circumstances, dream that we shall now give way. We have not the smallest intention of doing anything of the kind. We said, nearly a year ago, that so long as Knowlton was prosecuted we should persist in selling him; we repeated the same determination in

Court, and received for it a heavy sentence; we repeat the same to-day, in spite of the injudicious threat of Lord Justice Brett. Before we went up for judgment in the Court of Appeal we had made all preparations for the renewal of the struggle; parcels were ready to be forwarded to friends who had volunteered to sell in various towns; if we had gone to jail from the Court these would at once have been sent; as we won our case, they were sent just the same. On the following day orders were given to tell any wholesale agents who inquired that the book was again on sale, and the bills at 28, Stonecutter Street, announcing the suspension of the sale, were taken down; from that day forward all orders received have been punctually attended to, and the sale has been both rapid and steady. There is, however, one difference between the sale of Knowlton and that of our other literature: Knowlton is not sold across the counter at Stonecutter Street. When we were arrested in April 1877, we stopped the sale across counter, and we do not, at present, intend to recommence it. Our reason is very simple. The sale across counter does not, in any fashion, cause us any additional risk; the danger of it falls entirely on Mr. Ramsey and on Mr. and Mrs. Norrish; we fail to see that there is any courage in running other people into danger, and we prefer, therefore, to take the risk on ourselves. We do not intend to go down again and personally sell behind the counter; we thought it right to challenge a prosecution once, but, having done so, we intend now to go quietly on our ordinary way of business, and wait for any attack that may come.

“Meanwhile, we are not only selling the ‘Fruits of Philosophy’, but we also are striving to gain the legal right to do so. In the appeal from Mr. Vaughan’s decision Mr. Bradlaugh again raises all the disputed questions, and that appeal will be argued as persistently as was the one just decided in our favor. We are also making efforts to obtain an alteration of the law of libel,¹¹ and we hope soon to be able to announce the exact terms of the proposed Bill.

“My own pamphlet, on ‘The Law of Population’, is another effort in the same direction.¹² At our trial the Lord Chief Justice

11 The law of libel, established by Fox’s Act (1792) and the Truth of Utterance Act (1843), gave definitional power to juries and introduced the concepts of “malice” and “intention,” but it was inconsistent in cases of religion and blasphemy; it pertained to the publication or dissemination of both visual and verbal expression.

12 See note XII.21. This pamphlet can be profitably compared with AB’s first post-Theosophy expression on the subject, *Theosophy and the Law of*

said, that it was the advocacy of the preventive checks which was the assailable part of Knowlton; that advocacy is strongly and clearly to be found in the new pamphlet, together with facts useful to mothers, as to the physical injury caused by over-rapid child-bearing, which Knowlton did not give. The pamphlet has the advantage of being written fifty years later than the 'Fruits of Philosophy', and is more suitable, therefore, for circulation at the present day. We hope that it may gradually replace Knowlton as a manual for the poor. While we shall continue to print and sell Knowlton as long as any attempt is made to suppress it, we hope that the more modern pamphlet may gradually supersede the old one.

"If another prosecution should be instituted against us, our prosecutors would have a far harder task before them than they had last time. In the first place, they would be compelled to state, clearly and definitely, what it is to which they object; and we should, therefore, be able to bring our whole strength to bear on the assailed point. In the second place, they would have to find a jury who would be ready to convict, and after the full discussion of the question which has taken place the finding of such a jury would be by no means an easy thing to do. Lastly, they must be quite sure not to make any legal blunders, for they may be sure that such sins will find them out. Perhaps, on the whole, they had better leave us alone.

"I believe that our readers will be glad to have this statement of our action, and this assurance that we feel as certain of winning the battle of a Free Press as when we began it a year ago, and that our determination is as unwavering as when Serjeant Outram arrested us in the spring of last year. —ANNIE BESANT."

Several purchases were made from us by detectives, and we were more than once threatened with prosecution. At last evidence for a new prosecution was laid before the Home Office,¹³ and the Government declined to institute fresh proceedings or to have anything more to do with the matter. The battle was won. As

Population (1896), in which she apparently recanted her previous belief in birth control; however, toward the turn of the century, she reached a quiet co-existence with the Neo-Malthusian views of her earlier years.

See Appendix D4 for the conclusion of this 1896 publication.

13 The Home Office is the principal department of governmental affairs in England; it is responsible for internal affairs dealing with the law, including sentencing legislation.

soon as we were informed of this decision, we decided to sell only the copies we had in stock, and not to further reprint the pamphlet. Out-of-date as was much of its physiology, it was defended as a symbol, not for its intrinsic worth. We issued a circular stating that—

“The Knowlton pamphlet is now entirely out of print, and, 185,000 having been printed, the Freethought Publishing Company do not intend to continue the publication, which has never at any time been advertised by them except on the original issue to test the question. ‘The Law of Population’, price 6d., post free 8d., has been specially written by Mrs. Besant to supersede the Knowlton pamphlet.”

Thus ended a prolonged resistance to an unfair attempt to stifle discussion, and, much as I have suffered in consequence of the part I took in that fight, I have never once regretted that battle for the saving of the poor.

In July, 1877, a side-quarrel on the pamphlet begun which lasted until December 3rd, 1878, and was fought through court after court right out to a successful issue. We had avoided a seizure warrant by removing all our stock from 28, Stonecutter Street, but 657 of the pamphlets had been seized at Mr. True-love’s, in Holborn, and that gentleman was also proceeded against for selling the work. The summons for selling was withdrawn, and Mr. Bradlaugh succeeded in having his name and mine inserted as owners of the books in the summons for their destruction. The books remained in the custody of the magistrate until after the decision of the Court of Queen’s Bench, and on February 12th, 1878, Mr. Bradlaugh appeared before Mr. Vaughan at Bow Street, and claimed that the books should be restored to him. Mr. Collette, of the Vice Society,¹⁴ argued on the other hand that the books were obscene, and ought therefore to be destroyed. Mr. Vaughan reserved his decision, and asked for the Lord Chief Justice’s summing-up in the *Queen v. Bradlaugh and Besant*. On February 19th he made an order for the destruc-

14 The Vice Society in England was first formulated as the Society for Reformation of Manners in 1692 and reconfigured as the Proclamation Society in 1788; since 1802 it had called itself the Society for the Suppression of Vice, and it would shortly be renamed the National Vigilance Association in 1886.

tion of the pamphlets, against which Mr. Bradlaugh appealed to the General Sessions¹⁵ on the following grounds:

“1st. That the said book is not an obscene book within the meaning of the 20th and 21st Victoria, cap. 83.¹⁶ 2nd. That the said book is a scientific treatise on the law of population and its connexion with poverty, and that there is nothing in the book which is not necessary and legitimate in the description of the question. 3rd. That the advocacy of non-life-destroying checks to population is not an offence either at common law or by statute, and that the manner in which that advocacy is raised in the said book, ‘The Fruits of Philosophy’, is not such as makes it an indictable offence. 4th. That the discussion and recommendation of checks to over-population after marriage is perfectly lawful, and that there is in the advocacy and recommendations contained in the book ‘Fruits of Philosophy’ nothing that is prurient or calculated to inflame the passions. 5th. That the physiological information in the said book is such as is absolutely necessary for understanding the subjects treated, and such information is more fully given in Carpenter’s treatises on Physiology, and Kirke’s ‘Handbook of Physiology’,¹⁷ which later works are used for the instruction of the young under Government sanction. 6th. That the whole of the physiological information contained in the said book, ‘The Fruits of Philosophy’, has been published uninterruptedly for fifty years, and still is published in dear¹⁸ books, and that the publication of such information in a cheap form cannot constitute an offence.”

After a long argument before Mr. Edlin and a number of other Middlesex magistrates, the Bench affirmed Mr. Vaughan’s order, whereupon Mr. Bradlaugh promptly obtained from the Lord Chief Justice and Mr. Justice Mellor a writ of *certiorari*, removing their order to the Queen’s Bench Division of the High Court of Justice with a view to quashing it. The matter was not argued

15 General Sessions refers to a court of criminal jurisdiction.

16 20th and 21st Victoria, cap. 83, is the designation for the case in the official law records.

17 William Senhouse Kirke (1823-64) was the author of *The Handbook of Physiology*, which had reached its eighth enlarged edition in England by 1873; and by the turn of the century it would go through 15 editions in the United States.

18 “Dear” here means expensive, in contrast to cheap.

until the following November, on the 9th of which month it came on before Mr. Justice Mellor and Mr. Justice Field. The Court decided in Mr. Bradlaugh's favor and granted a rule quashing Mr. Vaughan's order, and with this fell the order of the Middlesex magistrates. The next thing was to recover the pamphlets thus rescued from destruction, and on December 3rd Mr. Bradlaugh appeared before Mr. Vaughan at Bow Street in support of a summons against Mr. Henry Wood, a police inspector, for detaining 657 copies of the "Fruits of Philosophy". After a long argument Mr. Vaughan ordered the pamphlets to be given up to him, and he carried them off in triumph, there and then, on a cab. We labelled the rescued pamphlets and sold every one of them, in mocking defiance of the Vice Society.

The circulation of literature advocating prudential checks to population was not stopped during the temporary suspension of the sale of the Knowlton pamphlet between June, 1877, and February, 1878. In October, 1877, I commenced in the *National Reformer* the publication of a pamphlet entitled: "The Law of Population, its consequences, and its bearing upon human conduct and morals". This little book included a statement of the law, evidence of the serious suffering among the poor caused by overlarge families, and a clear statement of the checks proposed, with arguments in their favor. The medical parts were omitted in the *National Reformer* articles, and the pamphlet was published complete early in November, at the price of sixpence—the same as Knowlton's—the first edition consisting of 5,000 copies. A second edition of 5,000 was issued in December, but all the succeeding editions were of 10,000 copies each. The pamphlet is now in its ninetieth thousand, and has gone all over the civilised world. It has been translated into Swedish, Danish, Dutch, French, German, and Italian, and 110,000 copies have been sold of an American reprint. On the whole, the prosecution of 1877 did not do much in stopping the circulation of literature on the Population Question.

The "Law" has been several times threatened with prosecution, and the initial steps have been taken, but the stage of issuing a warrant for its seizure has never yet been reached. Twice I have had the stock removed to avoid seizure, but on each occasion the heart of the prosecutors has failed them, and the little book has carried its message of mercy unspeeded by the advertisement of prosecution.

The struggle on the right to discuss the prudential restraint of population did not, however, conclude without a martyr. Mr.

Edward Truelove, alluded to above, was prosecuted for selling a treatise by Robert Dale Owen on “Moral Physiology”, and a pamphlet entitled, “Individual, Family, and National Poverty”. He was tried on February 1st, 1878, before the Lord Chief Justice in the Court of Queen’s Bench, and was most ably defended by Professor W.A. Hunter.¹⁹ The jury spent two hours in considering their verdict, and then returned into Court and stated that they were unable to agree. The majority of the jury were ready to convict, if they felt sure that Mr. Truelove would not be punished, but one of them boldly declared in Court: “As to the book, it is written in plain language for plain people, and I think that many more persons ought to know what the contents of the book are”. The jury was discharged, in consequence of this one man’s courage, but Mr. Truelove’s persecutors—the wretched Vice Society—were determined not to let their victim free. They proceeded to trial a second time, and wisely endeavored to secure a special jury, feeling that as prudential restraint would raise wages by limiting the supply of labor, they would be more likely to obtain a verdict from a jury of “gentlemen” than from one composed of workers. This attempt was circumvented by Mr. Truelove’s legal advisers, who let a *procedendo*²⁰ go which sent back the trial to the Old Bailey. The second trial was held on May 16th at the Central Criminal Court before Baron Pollock²¹ and a common jury, Professor Hunter and Mr. J.M. Davidson appearing for the defence. The jury convicted, and the brave old man, sixty-eight years of age, was condemned to four months’ imprisonment and £50 fine for selling a pamphlet which had been sold unchallenged, during a period of forty-five years, by James Watson, George Jacob Holyoake, Austin Holyoake, and Charles Watts. Mr. Grain, the counsel employed by the Vice Society, most unfairly used against Mr. Truelove my “Law of Population”, a pamphlet which contained, Baron Pollock said, “the head and front of the offence in the other [the Knowlton] case”. I find an indignant protest against

19 William Alexander Hunter (1844-98), Professor of Law at University College, London, had admitted women to his classes in 1875; a good friend of Bradlaugh, he would as an MP later advocate Home Rule for India.

20 A *procedendo* is a writ issued from a superior court to an inferior one, directing or authorizing the latter to act upon specific matters.

21 Sir Charles Edward Pollock (1823-97) gained the status of Justice of the High Court in 1875 with the consolidation of the courts effected by the Judicature Acts.

this odious unfairness in the *National Reformer* for May 19th: “‘My Law of Population’ was used against Mr. Truelove as an aggravation of his offence; passing over the utter meanness—worthy only of Collette—of using against a prisoner a book whose author has never been attacked for writing it—does Mr. Collette, or do the authorities, imagine that the severity shown to Mr. Truelove will in any fashion deter me from continuing the Malthusian propaganda? Let me here assure them, one and all, that it will do nothing of the kind; I shall continue to sell the ‘Law of Population’ and to advocate scientific checks to population, just as though Mr. Collette and his Vice Society were all dead and buried. In commonest justice they are bound to prosecute me, and if they get, and keep, a verdict against me, and succeed in sending me to prison, they will only make people more anxious to read my book, and make me more personally powerful as a teacher of the views which they attack.”

A persistent attempt was made to obtain a writ of error in Mr. Truelove’s case, but the Tory Attorney-General, Sir John Holker,²² refused it, although the ground on which it was asked was one of the grounds on which a similar writ had been granted to Mr. Bradlaugh and myself. Mr. Truelove was therefore compelled to suffer his sentence, but memorials, signed by 11,000 persons, asking for his release, were sent to the Home Secretary²³ from every part of the country, and a crowded meeting in St. James’ Hall, London, demanded his liberation with only six dissentients. The whole agitation did not shorten Mr. Truelove’s sentence by a single day, and he was not released from Coldbath Fields’ Prison until September 5th. On the 12th of the same month the Hall of Science was crowded with enthusiastic friends, who assembled to do him honor, and he was presented with a beautifully-illuminated address and a purse containing £177 (subsequent subscriptions raised the amount to £197 16s. 6d.).

It is scarcely necessary to say that one of the results of the prosecution was a great agitation throughout the country, and a

22 Sir John Holker (1828-82) was appointed Solicitor-General by Disraeli in 1874 and attained the post of Attorney-General the following year; he was extremely successful in winning verdicts.

23 The Home Secretary is essentially the British Secretary of State; an MP, he would be responsible for the workload of the Home Office, which would entail civil emergencies and matters of security. St. James’ Hall, built in Piccadilly in 1857-58, had a large concert hall, with two smaller halls upstairs; it was demolished in 1905.

wide popularisation of Malthusian views. Some huge demonstrations were held in favor of free discussion; on one occasion the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, was crowded to the doors; on another the Star Music Hall, Bradford, was crammed in every corner; on another the Town Hall, Birmingham, had not a seat or a bit of standing-room unoccupied. Wherever we went, separately or together, it was the same story, and not only were Malthusian lectures eagerly attended, and Malthusian literature eagerly bought, but curiosity brought many to listen to our Radical and Freethought lectures, and thousands heard for the first time what Secularism really meant.

The press, both London and provincial, agreed in branding the prosecution as foolish, and it was widely remarked that it resulted only in the wider circulation of the indicted book, and the increased popularity of those who had stood for the right of publication. The furious attacks since made upon us have been made chiefly by those who differ from us in theological creed, and who have found a misrepresentation of our prosecution served them as a convenient weapon of attack. During the last few years public opinion has been gradually coming round to our side, in consequence of the pressure of poverty resulting from widespread depression of trade, and during the sensation caused in 1884 by "The Bitter Cry of Outcast London",²⁴ many writers in the *Daily News*—notably Mr. G.R. Sims—boldly alleged that the distress was to a great extent due to the large families of the poor, and mentioned that we had been prosecuted for giving the very knowledge which would bring salvation to the sufferers in our great cities.

Among the useful results of the prosecution was the establishment of the Malthusian League, "to agitate for the abolition of all penalties on the public discussion of the population question", and "to spread among the people, by all practicable means, a knowledge of the law of population, of its consequences, and of its bearing upon human conduct and morals".²⁵ The first general

24 The authorship of *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: An Inquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor* (1883) has been fairly confidently attributed to Rev. Andrew Mearns.

25 The Malthusian League was founded in London in 1877 as the first organization in the world to overtly advocate family size limitation as a practical means of combatting poverty; its monthly journal, *The Malthusian: A Crusade Against Poverty*, was published from 1879 to 1921, and revived from 1949 to 1952. Bradlaugh was the essential force behind

meeting of the League was held at the Hall of Science on July 26th, 1877, and a council of twenty persons was elected, and this Council on August 2nd elected Dr. C.R. Drysdale, M.D. President, Mr. Swaagman Treasurer, Mrs. Besant Secretary, Mr. Shearer Assistant Secretary, and Mr. Hember Financial Secretary. Since 1877 the League, under the same indefatigable president, has worked hard to carry out its objects; it has issued a large number of leaflets and tracts; it supports a monthly journal, the *Malthusian*; numerous lectures have been delivered under its auspices in all parts of the country; and it has now a medical branch, into which none but duly qualified medical men and women are admitted, with members in all European countries.

Another result of the prosecution was the accession of "D."²⁶ to the staff of the *National Reformer*. This able and thoughtful writer came forward and joined our ranks as soon as he heard of the attack on us, and he further volunteered to conduct the journal during our imprisonment. From that time to this—a period of eight years—articles from his pen have appeared in our columns week by week, and during all that time not one solitary difficulty has arisen between editors and contributor. In public a trustworthy colleague, in private a warm and sincere friend, "D." has proved an unmixed benefit bestowed upon us by the prosecution.

Nor was "D." the only friend brought to us by our foes. I cannot ever think of that time without remembering that the prosecution brought me first into close intimacy with Mrs. Annie Parris—the wife of Mr. Touzeau Parris, the Secretary of the Defence Committee throughout all the fight—a lady who, during that long struggle, and during the, for me, far worse struggle that succeeded it, over the custody of my daughter, proved to me the most loving and sisterly of friends. One or two other friendships

establishing the organization (he had tried to start a similar one in 1861), and AB served as its secretary until 1891; see also note XV.20. More accurately, the term should be "Neo-Malthusian," which refers to the theory that acknowledges Malthus's concerns about over-population but replaces his solution of moral restraint with that of birth control (still within marriage) that employs various contraceptive tactics; see also note XII.6.

- 26 Although the identity of "D." has never been revealed, it has been ascertained from internal reference that it was not Dr. Charles R. Drysdale. One possibility is Dr. John Drysdale, but it was definitely not Dr. Edward Bibbins Aveling (1849-88), who later wrote for the *NR* as "E.D. (D.Sc., Lond.)."

which will, I hope, last my life, date from that same time of strife and anxiety.

The amount of money subscribed by the public during the Knowlton and succeeding prosecutions gives some idea of the interest felt in the struggle. The Defence Fund Committee in March, 1878, presented a balance-sheet, showing subscriptions amounting to £1,292 5s. 4d., and total expenditure in the Queen v. Bradlaugh and Besant, the Queen v. Truelove, and the appeal against Mr. Vaughan's order (the last two up to date) of £1,274 10s. This account was then closed and the balance of 17 15s. 4d. passed on to a new Fund for the defence of Mr. Truelove, the carrying on of the appeal against the destruction of the Knowlton pamphlet, and the bearing of the costs incident on the petition lodged against myself. In July this new fund had reached £196 16s. 7d., and after paying the remainder of the costs in Mr. Truelove's case, a balance of £26 15s. 2d. was carried on. This again rose to £247 15s. 2-1/2d., and the fund bore the expenses of Mr. Bradlaugh's successful appeal on the Knowlton pamphlet, the petition and subsequent proceedings in which I was concerned in the Court of Chancery,²⁷ and an appeal on Mr. Truelove's behalf, unfortunately unsuccessful, against an order for the destruction of the Dale Owen pamphlet. This last decision was given on February 21st, 1880, and on this the Defence Fund was closed. On Mr. Truelove's release, as mentioned above, a testimonial to the amount of £197 16s. 6d. was presented to him, and after the close of the struggle some anonymous friend sent to me personally £200 as "thanks for the courage and ability shown". In addition to all this, the Malthusian League received no less than £455 11s. 9d. during the first year of its life, and started on its second year with a balance in hand of £77 5s. 8d.

The propaganda of Freethought was not forgotten while this Malthusian quarrel was raging, and in August 1877 the Freethought Publishing Company issued the first English edition of lectures by Colonel Robert Ingersoll,²⁸ the eminent Freethought advocate of the United States. Since that time various

27 The Court of Chancery, superintended by the Lord Chancellor, has jurisdiction over causes in equity, or what is generally called justice according to natural law, where strict law cannot always be applied.

28 Colonel Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-99), American politician and orator known as "the great agnostic," lectured and published widely, and his work was often advertised in the same publications that announced the published titles of Bradlaugh and Besant.

other publishers have circulated thousands of his lectures, but it has always been to me a matter of satisfaction that we were the first to popularise the eloquent American in England. The ruling of the Lord Chief Justice that a book written with pure intention and meant to convey useful knowledge might yet be obscene, drew from me a pamphlet entitled, "Is the Bible Indictable?", in which I showed that the Bible came clearly within the judge's ruling. This turning of the tables on our persecutors caused considerable sensation at the time, and the pamphlet had, and still has, a very wide circulation. It is needless to add that the Sunday Freethought lectures were carried on despite the legal toils of the week, and, as said above, the large audiences attracted by the prosecution gave a splendid field for the inculcation of Freethought views. The National Secular Society consequently increased largely in membership, and a general impulse towards Freethought was manifest throughout the land.

The year 1878, so far as lecturing work was concerned, was largely taken up with a crusade against the Beaconsfield Government and in favor of peace.²⁹ Lord Beaconsfield's hired roughs broke up several peace meetings during the winter, and on February 24th Mr. Bradlaugh and Mr. Auberon Herbert, at the request of a meeting of working-class delegates, held in Hyde Park a "Demonstration in favor of Peace". The war party attacked the meeting and some sharp fighting took place, but a resolution "That this meeting declares in favor of peace" was carried despite them. A second meeting was called by the Working Men's Committee³⁰ for March 10th, and a large force of medical students, roughs, militia-men, and "gentlemen", armed with loaded bludgeons, heavy pieces of iron, sticks with metal twisted round them, and various sharp-cutting weapons, went to Hyde Park to make a riot. The meeting was held and the resolution carried, but after it had dissolved there was some furious fighting. We learned afterwards that a large money reward had been offered to a band of roughs if they would disable Mr. Bradlaugh, and a violent organised attack was made on him. The stewards of the meeting carried short policemen's

29 Lord Beaconsfield is the title of Prime Minister Disraeli, and the "war party," which urged intervention in the war between Turkey and Russia, refers to his Conservative, or Tory, government (see note XIII.13).

30 Numerous Working Men's Committees existed around the country, including the London Working Men's Committee for Promoting the Separation of Church and State.

truncheons³¹ to defend themselves, and a number of these gathered round their chief and saved his life. He and his friends had to fight their way out of the park; a man, armed with some sharp instrument, struck at Mr. Bradlaugh from behind, and cut one side of his hat from top to brim; his truncheon was dented with the jagged iron used as weapon; and his left arm, with which he guarded his head, was one mass of bruises from wrist to elbow. Lord Beaconsfield's friends very nearly succeeded in their attempt at murder, after all, for a dangerous attack of erysipelas³² set in, in the injured arm, and confined Mr. Bradlaugh to his room for sixteen days.

The provinces were far more strongly against war than was the capital, and in them we held many large and enthusiastic meetings in favor of peace. At Huddersfield the great Drill Hall was crammed for a lecture by me against war, and throughout Yorkshire and Lancashire scarcely a voice was ever raised in crowded meetings in defence of the Beaconsfieldian policy. A leaflet of mine, entitled "Rushing into War", was reprinted in various parts of the country, and was circulated in tens of thousands, and each Freethought leader worked with tongue and pen, on platform and in press, to turn the public feeling against war. The Freethought party may well take credit to itself for having been first in the field against the Tory policy, and for having successfully begun the work later carried on by Mr. Gladstone³³ in his Midlothian campaign. They did more than any other party in the country to create that force of public opinion which overthrew the Tory Government in 1880.

31 A truncheon usually refers to a policeman's nightstick, or billy club; the majority of police in Britain still carry truncheons instead of being armed with guns.

32 Erysipelas is an acute disease, marked by fever, which is associated with severe inflammation of the skin and subcutaneous tissues; sometimes called St. Anthony's Fire, it is caused by hemolytic streptococcus.

33 William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98), known as the Grand Old Man of Liberalism, was a four-time prime minister of Britain (1868-74, 1880-85, 1886, and 1892-94); supported by radicals and finally again by his own Liberal party, he ran a successful parliamentary campaign in 1880, representing the Scottish county of Midlothian, and forced the overthrow of the Tory Government; for his review of AB's *An Autobiography*, see Appendix B4.

XVII.

The year 1878 was a dark one for me; it saw me deprived of my little daughter, despite the deed of separation by which the custody of the child had been assigned to me. The first notice that an application was to be made to the High Court of Chancery to deprive me of this custody reached me in January, 1878, while the decision on the Knowlton case was still pending, but the petition was not filed till April. The time was ill-chosen; Mabel had caught scarlet fever at a day-school¹ she was attending, and for some days was dangerously ill. The fact of her illness was communicated to her father, and while the child was lying ill in bed, and I had cancelled all engagements so that I might not leave her side, I received a copy of the petition to deprive me of her custody. This document alleged as grounds for taking away the child:

“The said Annie Besant is, by addresses, lectures, and writings, endeavoring to propagate the principles of Atheism, and has published a book intitled: ‘The Gospel of Atheism’. She has also associated herself with an infidel lecturer and author, named Charles Bradlaugh, in giving lectures and in publishing books and pamphlets, whereby the truth of the Christian religion is impeached, and disbelief in all religion is inculcated.

“The said Annie Besant has also, in conjunction with the said Charles Bradlaugh, published an indecent and obscene pamphlet called ‘The Fruits of Philosophy’.

“The said pamphlet has recently been the subject of legal proceedings, in the course of which the said Annie Besant publicly justified its contents and publication, and stated, or inferred, that in her belief it would be right to teach young children the physiological facts contained in the said pamphlet. [This was a deliberate falsehood: I had never stated or inferred anything of the kind.] The said Annie Besant has also edited and published a pamphlet intitled ‘The Law of Population; its consequences, and its bearing upon human conduct and morals’, to which book or pamphlet your petitioners crave leave to refer.”

1 Mabel was attending a day-school because she lived at home with her mother; the distinction is being made in contrast to the boarding school her father sent her to.

The petition was unfortunately heard before the Master of the Rolls, Sir George Jessel, a man animated by the old spirit of Hebrew bigotry,² and who had superadded to this the coarse time-serving morality of “a man of the world”, sceptical of all sincerity, and contemptuous of all self-devotion to a cause that did not pay, as of a weakness by which he was himself singularly unassailable. The treatment I received at his hands on my first appearance in Court told me what I had to expect. After my previous experience of the courtesy of English judges, I was startled to hear a harsh, loud voice exclaim, in answer to a statement from Mr. Ince, Q.C., that I appeared in person:

“Appear in person? A lady appear in person? Never heard of such a thing! Does the lady really appear in person?”

After a variety of similar remarks, delivered in the most grating tones and with the roughest manner, Sir George Jessel tried to attain his object by browbeating me directly.

“Is this the lady?”

“I am the respondent to the petition, my lord—Mrs. Besant.”

“Then I advise you, Mrs. Besant, to employ counsel to represent you, if you can afford it, and I suppose you can.”

“With all submission to your lordship, I am afraid I must claim my right of arguing my case in person.”

“You will do so if you please, of course, but I think you had much better appear by counsel. I give you notice that, if you do not, you must not expect to be shown any consideration. You will not be heard by me at any greater length than the case requires, nor allowed to go into irrelevant matter, as persons who argue their own cases generally do.”

“I trust I shall not do so, my lord; but in any case I shall be arguing under your lordship’s complete control.”

2 By referring to Sir George Jessel as “animated by the old spirit of Hebrew bigotry,” AB is emphasizing the ancient Jewish tradition of treating women as completely subservient to men. As proof of this attitude, she quotes his surprise that a lady might appear in person, “Never heard of such a thing!” Of course, she had just appeared in person and argued her own case in the Knowlton trial, but she is committing the unprecedented act of not only appearing at her custody trial but serving as her own counsel as well. See also note X.4.

This encouraging beginning may be taken as a sample of the case. Mr. Ince, the counsel on the other side, was constantly practising in the Rolls' Court, knew all the judge's peculiarities, how to flatter and humor him on the one hand, and how to irritate him against his opponent on the other. Nor was Mr. Ince above using his influence with the Master of the Rolls to obtain an unfair advantage, knowing that whatever he said would be believed against any contradiction of mine: thus he tried to obtain costs against me on the ground that the public helped me, whereas his client received no subscriptions in aid of his suit; yet as a matter of fact subscriptions had been collected for his client, and the Bishop of Lincoln, and many of the principal clergy and churchmen of the diocese had contributed liberally towards the persecution of the Atheist.³

Mr. Ince and Mr. Bardswell argued that my Atheism and Malthusianism made me an unfit guardian for my child; Mr. Ince declared that Mabel, educated by me, would "be helpless for good in this world", and "hopeless for good hereafter"; outcast in this life and damned in the next; Mr. Bardswell implored the Judge to consider that my custody of her "would be detrimental to the future prospects of the child in society, to say nothing of her eternal prospects". I could have laughed, had not the matter been so terribly serious, at the mixture of Mrs. Grundy,⁴ marriage-establishment, and hell, presented as an argument for robbing a mother of her child. Once only did judge and counsel fall out; Mr. Bardswell had carelessly forgotten that Sir George Jessel was a Jew, and lifting eyes to heaven said:

"Your lordship, I think, will scarcely credit it, but Mrs. Besant says in a later affidavit that she took away the Testament from the child, because it contained coarse passages unfit for a child to read."

To his horror, Sir George Jessel considered there were "some passages which a child had better not read in the New Testament", and went on:

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- 3 The prosecution was seeking to have AB pay the court costs on the presumption that she was the only one to receive outside backing for her defense while Frank had merely his private resources; the *NR* had no trouble finding evidence to the contrary, however, as a local support fund had in fact been raised in his district to help defray his expenses.
 - 4 Mrs. Grundy is cited as representing narrow, prudish, intolerant conventions, especially regarding the proprieties.

"It is not true to say there are no passages that are unfit for a child's reading, because I think there are a great many.

"Mr. BARDSWELL: I do not know of any passages that could fairly be called coarse.

"Sir G. JESSEL: I cannot quite assent to that."

With the exception of this little outburst of religious feeling against the book written by apostate Jews,⁵ Jewish judge and Christian counsel were united in their hatred of the Atheist. My argument fell on deaf ears; I distinctly admitted that I was an Atheist, that I had withdrawn the child from religious instruction at school, that I was the author of the "Gospel of Atheism", "The Fruits of Christianity", "The Freethinkers' Text Book, Part II.", and "The Law of Population", produced against me: I claimed her custody on the ground that it was given me by the deed of separation executed by the father who was trying to set it aside, and that no pretence was made that the child was neglected, the admission being, on the contrary, that she was admirably cared for: I offered lastly, if she were taken from me, to devote £110 a year to her maintenance and education, provided that she were placed in the hands of a third person, not of her father. Sir George Jessel decided against me, as he had clearly intended to do from the very outset, and as the part of his judgment affecting Freethinkers as parents is of continued interest I reprint it here.

"I am glad to say that, so far as I can see, Mrs. Besant has been kind and affectionate in her conduct and behavior towards the child, and has taken the greatest possible care of her so far as regards her physical welfare. I have no doubt she entertains that sincere affection for the child which a mother should always feel, and which no merely speculative opinions can materially affect. But, unfortunately, since her separation from her husband, Mrs. Besant has taken upon herself not merely to ignore religion, not merely to believe in no religion, but to publish and avow that non-belief—to become the publisher of pamphlets written by herself, and to deliver lectures composed by herself, stating her disbelief in religion altogether, and stating that she has no belief in the existence of a providence or a God. She has endeavored to convince

5 Apostate Jews are the Jewish apostles of Jesus, himself a Jew, who are the authors of the New Testament; AB is here using the term ironically to show up further Jessel's prejudice and hypocrisy.

others, by her lectures and by her pamphlets, that the denial of all religion is a right and proper thing to recommend to mankind at large. It is not necessary for me to express any opinion as to the religious convictions of any one, or even as to their non-religious convictions. But I must, as a man of the world, consider what effect on a woman's position this course of conduct must lead to. I know, and must know as a man of the world, that her course of conduct must quite cut her off, practically, not merely from the sympathy of, but from social intercourse with, the great majority of her sex. I do not believe a single clergyman's wife in England living with her husband would approve of such conduct, or associate with Mrs. Besant; and I must take that into consideration in considering what effect it would have upon the child if brought up by a woman of such reputation. But the matter does not stop there. Not only does Mrs. Besant entertain those opinions which are reprobated by the great mass of mankind—whether rightly or wrongly I have no business to say, though I, of course, think rightly—but she carries those speculative opinions into practice as regards the education of the child, and from the moment she does that she brings herself within the lines of the decisions of Lord Chancellors and eminent judges with reference to the custody of children by persons holding speculative opinions, and in those cases it has been held that before giving the custody of a child to those who entertain such speculative opinions the Court must consider what effect infusing those opinions as part of its practical education would have upon the child. That is undoubtedly a matter of the greatest importance. Upon this point there is no conflict of testimony whatever. Mrs. Besant herself says that she prohibited the governess from giving any religious education to the child, and has prevented the child from obtaining any religious education at all. When the child went to school—a day school, as I understand—Mrs. Besant prohibited the governess of that school from imparting any religious education, in the same way that she had prohibited the former governess, who was a home governess, from giving any religious education, and Mrs. Besant gave none herself. It is, therefore, not only the entertaining and publishing these opinions, but she considers it her duty so to educate the child as to prevent her having any religious opinions whatever until she attains a proper age. I have no doubt that Mrs. Besant is conscientious in her opinions upon all these matters, but I also have a conscientious opinion, and I am bound to give effect to it. I think such a course of education not only reprehensible but detestable, and likely to work utter ruin to the child, and I cer-

tainly should upon this ground alone decide that this child ought not to remain another day under the care of her mother."

As to the publication of the Knowlton pamphlet, Sir George Jessel decided that that also was a good ground for separating mother and child. He committed himself to the shameful statement, so strongly condemned by the Lord Chief Justice, that Dr. Knowlton was in favor of "promiscuous intercourse without marriage", and then uttered the gross falsehood that his view "was exactly the same as was entertained by the Lord Chief Justice of England". After this odious misrepresentation, I was not surprised to hear from him words of brutal insult to myself. I print here an article on him written at the time, not one word of which I now regret, and which I am glad to place on record in permanent form, now that only his memory remains for me to hate.

"SIR GEORGE JESSEL.

DURING the long struggle which began in March, 1877, no word has escaped me against the respective judges before whom I have had to plead. Some have been harsh, but, at least, they have been fairly just, and even if a sign of prejudice appeared, it was yet not sufficient to be a scandal to the Bench. Of Sir George Jessel, however, I cannot speak in terms even of respect, for in his conduct towards myself he has been rough, coarse, and unfair, to an extent that I never expected to see in any English judge. Sir George Jessel is subtle and acute, but he is rude, overbearing, and coarse; he has the sneer of a Mephistopheles, mingled with a curious monkeyish pleasure in inflicting pain.⁶ Sir George Jessel prides himself on being 'a man of the world', and he expresses the low morality common to that class when the phrase is taken in its worst sense; he holds, like the 'men of the world', who 'see life' in Leicester Square and the Haymarket,⁷ that women are kept chaste only through fear and from lack of opportunity; that men

6 Mephistopheles is the name of the devil in various versions of the Faust legend, especially the drama written by the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), which was published in full in the year of his death.

7 Leicester Square, celebrated for its Turkish baths and theatres, was essentially a masculine domain in the latter half of the nineteenth century (its popularity with the *demi-monde* meant it was not an appropriate locale for unescorted ladies to visit), while the Haymarket, with its inns and houses of entertainment, became notorious for being frequented by prostitutes and abandoned women.

may be loose in morals if they will, and that women are divided into two classes for their use—one to be the victims and the toys of the moment, the others to be kept ignorant and strictly guarded, so as to be worthy of being selected as wives. Sir George Jessel considers that a woman becomes an outcast from society because she thinks that women would be happier, healthier, safer, if they had some slight acquaintance with physiology, and were not condemned, through ignorance, to give birth to human lives foredoomed to misery, to disease, and to starvation. Sir George Jessel says that no ‘modest woman’ will associate with one who spreads among her sex the knowledge which will enable her sisters to limit their families within their means. The old brutal Jewish spirit, regarding women as the mere slaves of men, breaks out in the coarse language which disgraced himself rather than the woman at whom it was aimed. Sir George Jessel might have been surprised, had he been in the Free Trade Hall, Manchester, on the following day, and had seen it filled with men and women, quiet looking, well dressed, and respectable, and had heard the cries of ‘Shame on him!’ which rang round the hall, when his brutal remark was quoted. Such language only causes a re-action towards the insulted person even among those who would otherwise be antagonistic, and Sir George Jessel has ranged on my side many a woman who, but for him, would have held aloof.

“Sir George Jessel is a Jew; he thinks that a parent should be deprived of a child if he or she withholds from it religious training. Two hundred years ago, Sir George Jessel’s children might have been taken from him because he did not bring them up as Christians; Sir George Jessel and his race have been relieved from disabilities, and he now joins the persecuting majority, and deals out to the Atheist the same measure dealt to his forefathers by the Christians.⁸ The Master of the Rolls pretended that by depriving

8 Jews had in fact been banned from Britain for three centuries, until Oliver Cromwell allowed their return in response to a 1656 petition; their resettlement was hardly smooth, and they were subject to considerable pressure to convert to Christianity. For more on anti-Jewish legislation in England in late-seventeenth-century Britain, see Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer, *Antisemitism: Myth and Hate from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). Social disabilities for Jews in Besant’s present-day Victorian England still existed, of course; see, for example, George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876) for a partial exposé. By raising the issue of anti-Semitism, AB is, as always, continuing her own practice of pointing out un-Christian-like behavior on the part of many of her countrymen.

me of my child he was inflicting no punishment on me! If the Master of the Rolls have any children, he must be as hard-hearted in the home as he is on the bench, if he would not feel that any penalty was inflicted on him if his little ones were torn from him and handed over to a Christian priest, who would teach them to despise him as a Jew, and hate him as a denier of Christ. Even now, Jews are under many social disabilities, and even when richly gilt, Christian society looks upon them with thinly-concealed dislike. The old wicked prejudice still survives against them, and it is with shame and with disgust that Liberals see a Jew trying to curry favor with Christian society by reviving the obsolete penalties once inflicted on his own people.

"Sir George Jessel was not only brutally harsh; he was also utterly unfair. He quoted the Lord Chief Justice as agreeing with him in his judgment on Knowlton, on points where the Chief had distinctly expressed the contrary opinion, and he did this not through ignorance, but with the eloquent words of Sir Alexander Cockburn lying in front of him, and after I had pointed out to him, and he had deliberately read, or professed to read, the passages which contained the exact contrary of that which he put into the Chief's mouth.

"Of one thing Sir George Jessel and his Christian friends may be sure: that neither prosecution nor penalty will prevent me from teaching both Atheism and Malthusianism to all who will listen to me, and since Christianity is still so bigoted as to take the child from the mother because of a difference of creed, I will strain every nerve to convert the men and women around me, and more especially the young, to a creed more worthy of humanity.

"Sir George Jessel pretended to have the child's interests at heart: in reality he utterly ignored them. I offered to settle £110 a year on the child if she was placed in the charge of some trustworthy and respectable person, but the Master did not even notice the offer. He takes away the child from plenty and comfort, and throws her into comparative poverty; he takes her away from most tender and watchful care, and places her under the guardianship of a man so reckless of her health, that he chose the moment of her serious illness to ask for her removal; he takes her away from cultured and thoughtful society to place her among half-educated farmers. Nay, he goes further: Dr. Drysdale's affidavit stated that it was absolutely necessary at present that she should have her mother's care; and Sir George Jessel disregards this, and, in her still weak state, drags her from her home

and from all she cares for, and throws her into the hands of strangers. If any serious results follow, Sir George Jessel will be morally, though not legally, responsible for them. In her new home she can have no gentle womanly attendance. No Christian lady of high character will risk the misconstruction to which she would be exposed by living alone at Sibsey Vicarage with a young clergyman who is neither a bachelor nor a widower; the child will be condemned either to solitary neglect at home, or to the cold strictness of a boarding-school.⁹ She is bright, gay, intelligent, merry now. What will she be at a year's end? My worst wish for Sir George Jessel is that the measure he has meted out to me may, before he dies, be measured out to him or his."

There is little to add to the story. I gave the child up, as I was compelled to do, and gave notice of appeal to the Court of Appeal against the order of the Master of the Rolls. Meanwhile, as all access to the children was denied me by the father, I gave him notice that unless access were given I would sue for a restitution of conjugal rights,¹⁰ merely for the sake of seeing my children. As the deed of separation had been broken by his action, I supposed that the courts would not permit it to be broken for his advantage while holding it binding on me. Unhappily, at this critical point, my health gave way; the loneliness and silence of the house, of which my darling had always been the sunshine and the music, weighed on me like an evil dream: at night I could not sleep, missing in the darkness the soft breathing of the little child; her cries as she clung to me and was forcibly carried away rang ever in my ears; at last, on July 25th, I was suddenly struck down with fever, and had the rest of pain and delirium instead of the agony of conscious loss. While I was lying there prostrate an order was served on me from the Master of the Rolls, granted on Mr. Besant's application, to restrain me from bringing any suit against him. As soon as I recovered, I took steps for contesting this order, but no definite action could be taken until after the Long Vacation.¹¹ The case came on

9 Neither Mabel nor her brother Digby were to live at home with their father in Sibsey; they were both consigned to boarding school after he attained custody of Mabel.

10 By talking about suing for restitution of conjugal rights, AB hoped that the threat of returning to her husband's home would gain her access to her children.

11 The Long Vacation is the summer vacation of both British universities and the law courts.

for hearing first in November, 1878, and then in January, 1879. All access to the children had been denied me, and the money due to me had been withheld. By this my opponent had put himself so completely in the wrong that even the Master of the Rolls uttered words of severe condemnation of the way in which I had been treated. Then a curious interlude took place. The Master of the Rolls advised me to file a counter-claim for divorce or for judicial separation, and I gladly agreed to do so, feeling very doubtful as to the Master of the Rolls' power to do anything of the kind, but very glad that he should think he had the authority.¹² While the claim was being prepared, I obtained access to the children under an interim order,¹³ as well as the money owing to me, and at the end of March the case again came before the Master of the Rolls. The claim filed alleged distinct acts of cruelty, and I brought witnesses to support the claim, among them the doctor who had attended me during my married life.¹⁴ Mr. Ince filed an answer of general denial, adding that the acts of cruelty, if any, were "done in the heat of the moment". He did not, however, venture to contest the case, although I tendered myself for cross-examination, but pleaded the deed of separation as a bar to further proceedings on my part; I argued on the other hand that as the deed had been broken by the plaintiff's act all my original rights revived. Sir George Jessel held that the deed of separation condoned all that had gone before it, if it was raised as a bar to further proceedings, and expressed his regret that he had not known there would be "any objection on the

12 AB had not previously been willing to sue for divorce, but now that such an action seemed preferable to a legal deed of separation if she could not retain custody of Mabel, she was ready to consider it. Prior to the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, only two kinds of divorce were possible—a judicial separation granted by the Ecclesiastical Courts and a dissolution of marriage obtained by an Act of Parliament.

13 An interim order is temporary, or provisional, made pending further proceedings.

14 AB cited Frank's violence in hitting her early in 1870 during her pregnancy, throwing her against a stile during a walk in the summer of 1871, and pushing her out of bed; Dr. Lauriston Winterbotham, of Cheltenham, testified on her behalf. Although her husband categorically denied these charges, he later contradicted himself by saying he might have committed such acts "inadvertently" because she provoked him by not complying with his requests; it seems that several of their quarrels were occasioned by her raising the issue of limiting the size of their family. For more of this testimony, see the reports of the Besant case in the *Times* (28 March 1879) and the *NR* (6 April 1879).

other side”, when he advised a claim for a judicial separation. On the final hearing of the case in April in the Rolls’ Court Sir George Jessel decided that the deed of separation was good as protecting Mr. Besant from any suit on my part to obtain a decree for the restitution of conjugal rights, although it had been set aside on the one matter of value to me—the custody of my child. The net result of the proceedings was that had I gone to the Divorce Court in 1873, I might at least have obtained a divorce *a mensa e thoro*;¹⁵ that in my desire to avoid publicity, and content in what I believed to be secure possession of my child, I had agreed to a deed which fully protected Mr. Besant against any action on my part, but which could be set aside by him for the purpose of robbing me of my child.

The argument in the Court of Appeal came on during April, and was, as I expected, decided against me, the absolute right of the father being declared, and a married mother held to have no sort of claim over her own children. The worst stigma affixed to marriage by the law of England is this ignoring of any right of the married mother to her child; the law protects the unmarried, but insults the married, mother, and places in the hands of the legal husband an instrument of torture whose power to agonise depends on the tenderness and strength of the motherliness of the wife.¹⁶ In fact the law says to every woman: “Choose which of these two positions you will have: if you are legally your husband’s wife you can have no legal claim to your children; if legally you are your husband’s mistress, then your rights as mother are secure”.

But one thing I gained in the Court of Appeal. The Court expressed a strong view as to my right of access, and directed me to apply to Sir George Jessel for it, stating that it could not doubt

15 A divorce *à mensa et thoro* (from room and board) amounts to a full legal separation, but without the right to remarry; however, even if AB had been able to prove Frank’s acts of cruelty, she would not have been able to sue for a full divorce *à vinculo matrimonii* (from the bonds of marriage), which allows for remarriage, because a wife must also prove the husband’s adultery. Thus, although Bradlaugh’s wife had died during the Knowlton Trial, he and AB were never in a legal position to marry.

16 While a woman remained legally her husband’s property, this situation could still inhere, hence the Married Women’s Property Act of 1882 was a very important step in the direction of granting women rights that could be extended to the marriage and divorce laws; see Appendix C2.

that he would give it. I made the application and obtained an order of access to the children, seeing them alone, once a month; of a visit of the children to London twice a year, with their governess, for a week each time; of a week at the seaside in similar fashion once a year; of a weekly letter from each of them with the right of reply. This order, obtained after such long struggle, has proved useless. The monthly visit so upset my poor little daughter, and made her fret so constantly after me, that in mercy to her I felt compelled to relinquish it; on the first visit to the seaside, I was saddled with the cost of maintaining the Rev. Mr. and Mrs. Child, who were placed as guardians of the children, and who treated me in their presence as though I were a dangerous animal from whom they were to be protected. To give but an instance of the sort of treatment I received, I wished Mabel to have the benefit of sea-bathing, and was told that she could not be allowed to bathe with me, and this with a suggestiveness that sorely taxed my self-control. I could not apply to the Court against the ingenious forms of petty insult employed, while I felt that they must inevitably estrange the children from me if practised always in their presence. After a vain appeal that some sort of consideration should be shown to me, an appeal answered by a mocking suggestion that I should complain to the Master of the Rolls, I made up my mind as to my future course. I resolved neither to see nor to write to my children until they were old enough to understand and to judge for themselves, and I know that I shall win my daughter back in her womanhood, though I have been robbed of her childhood.¹⁷ By effacing myself then, I saved her from a constant and painful struggle unfitted for childhood's passionate feelings, and left her only a memory that she loves, undefaced by painful remembrances of her mother insulted in her presence.

Unhappily Sir George Jessel has terribly handicapped her future; left to me she would have had the highest education now open to girls; left to her present guardian she receives only fifth-rate teaching, utterly unfitted for the present day. Twice I have offered to bear the whole expense of her education in the High School at Cheltenham, or in some London College, without in any way appearing in the matter, but each time my offer has been roughly and insultingly refused, and the influence that marred

17 As she expected, both Mabel and Digby joined their mother when they came of age, in turn becoming Theosophists and spending time with her in India; see notes VI.5-6.

the mother's life is undermining the future happiness of the child's. But I am not without hope that I may be able to obtain from the Court of Chancery an order for the benefit of its ward, and I trust before very long that I shall be able to insure to my child an education which will fit her to play her part worthily when she reaches womanhood. I had hoped to save her from the pain of rejecting a superstitious faith, but that is now impossible, and she must fight her way out of darkness into light as her mother did before her. But in order that she may do so, education now is of vital importance, and that I am striving to obtain for her. I live in the hope that in her womanhood she may return to the home she was torn from in her childhood, and that, in faithful work and noble endeavor, she may wear in future years in the Freethought ranks a name not wholly unloved or unhonored therein, for the sake of the woman who has borne it in the van¹⁸ through eleven years of strife.

THE END.

18 "In the van" means in the vanguard, or at the forefront, beginning or head; it is a fitting term for AB's leadership and pioneering role in the Freethought movement.

Appendix A: Publication of Autobiographical Sketches (1884-85) and Aftermath

1. Reviews of *Autobiographical Sketches*

[*Autobiographical Sketches* was not broadly reviewed, largely, we can speculate, because it was primarily of interest to fellow members of the National Secular Society, many of whom would already have read its installments over the year-and-a-half period of its publication in *Our Corner*; moreover, toward the end of its serialization, Charles Bradlaugh had been providing advertising space in the pages of the *National Reformer* for its forthcoming single-volume edition. Perhaps, too, the mainstream press did not wish to draw undue attention to Besant by letting its reviews serve as free publicity for her book. But by 1893, Besant's conversion to Theosophy had brought her renewed notoriety that could not be ignored, while at the same time she seemed less threatening precisely because the focus on Theosophy defused some of the impact of the controversial social issues she had all along espoused. As a result, I have chosen to reproduce a goodly number of reviews of *An Autobiography* in Appendix B, so this edition allows us to read the two sets of reviews in conjunction in order to see what both autobiographies have in common—and the extent to which Besant was both marginalized and subjected to *ad hominem* attacks for her beliefs.]

- a. Unsigned review, "Contemporary Literature: History and Biography," *The Westminster Review* n.s. 70.1 (July 1886): 275-76

[Appropriately enough, this all-too-brief, unsigned review begins with an epigraph from Shakespeare's *Pericles*, "Truth can never be confirm'd enough,/ Though doubts did ever steep." The review is sympathetic, yet it focuses on the two trials—and Besant's roles of mother and wife—at the expense of what the text itself has to offer and ends up reading more like an editorial than a book review. Nonetheless, as an endorsement to readers who might otherwise have been dismissive, it performs a real service. From its founding in 1824 to its conclusion in 1914, the monthly *Westminster Review* maintained a reputation of responsible reviewing and provided a forum for contemporary issues, and behind its policy of anonymous reviewing we now recognize the work of such eminent writers as James Mill, George Eliot, and George Henry Lewes. B.E. Maidment cites A. Heminway, "Cultural Philanthropy and the Invention of the Norwich School," *Oxford Art Journal* 2 (1988): 17-39, as considering the *Westminster Review* an exemplary

case of contributing to the “discourse of bourgeois progressivism”; see also Maidment, “Victorian Periodicals and Academic Discourse,” *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, ed. Laurel Brake, Aled Jones, and Lionel Madden (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 150 especially.]

A touching account of the life of a singularly ill-used woman. Most of us have read in the newspapers the details of the various legal proceedings in which she was engaged, and some of us have perhaps been inclined to place too severe a construction upon the purely literary connection that subsisted between her and Mr. Bradlaugh, or to listen too readily to the roar of calumny that assailed them, on the publication of the notorious “Fruits of Philosophy.” Now, however, that the conflict is over, and it is possible to consider the facts without passion or prejudice, it will readily be admitted by any impartial person that although the judgment of the Master of the Rolls may have been as a dry matter of law technically correct, yet in truth that judgment under the forms of justice inflicted a cruel wrong upon a tender mother and a spotless wife in depriving her of her children, not on account of any moral fault (for her opponents had sought in vain for a speck upon her purity), but wholly and solely in regard to her speculative opinions. Let us hope that her sufferings have not been in vain, and that she will be the last in our own or any future generation to incur such a penalty for a matter of opinion. Her book is very pleasantly and moderately written, and we can confidently recommend it to our readers.

- b. G.W. Foote, “The Latest Apostle of Socialism,” *Progress: A Monthly Magazine of Advanced Thought* 6.6 (June 1886): 266-73; Annie Besant, “Rejoinder” 7.1 (July 1886): 290-94; and Foote, “Reply to Mrs. Besant’s Rejoinder” (294-300)

[The *Progress* was founded by Foote in 1883, and edited chiefly by him, although Edward Aveling served as co-editor when Foote was jailed because of his participation in the Freethought Acts. Foote’s journal ran contemporaneously with *Our Corner*, and it is likely that both publications were read mostly by their staunch adherents. His article and reply serve as a measure of how Besant was perceived and judged by someone with animosity toward her and her views, and after many years of jealous grumbling over her favored leadership role in the National Secular Society, he now used this opportunity to openly attack Socialism. Foote’s other periodical, *The Freethinker*, which he founded in 1881, continues to be published to this day.]

From Foote (267)

[The second paragraph of Foote’s critique takes up the recently published *Autobiographical Sketches*, here referred to as her *Autobiography*, with which he shows sporadic familiarity. Note how he faults Besant

for her elitist background, as if only members of the working class can argue for Socialism, while he is himself rather denigrating of them; his own terminology of “elevation” results in his calling the workers “thoughtless and sensual,” unreasonable and prejudiced, and as exhibiting “congenital” faults.]

Mrs. Besant’s enthusiastic nature makes her too much of an optimist. Her *Autobiography* shows a meagre acquaintance with “the world,” which few good women ever see much of, unless they are poor themselves and compelled to earn an ordinary living. She moves in a select circle of educated people, whose passions are conventionally veiled. If she could ride outside a car or an omnibus, or in a crowded third-class carriage; mingle freely with the common people on a Bank Holiday; surge in with the pit and gallery mob at a theatre; sit observantly among the gods and mashers in music-halls; and wander hour after hour by gaslight in frequented streets: she would be in a better position to judge how far human nature is capable of immediate elevation. The men and women of her Socialist essays are abstractions, who can be shuffled as easily as a pack of cards; whereas the men and women of the actual world are thoughtless and sensual, tough as leather to reason and fluent as water to prejudice. Education will do much to improve them, but it will take time. Their faults are largely congenital, as any student of character easily perceives, for the vulgar type is found in all classes; and if you cannot cultivate a new variety of flower except by a long and careful process, how can you expect to cultivate suddenly a new variety of human nature? Mrs. Besant says that institutions act on men. Would it not be truer to say *re-act*? Institutions do not precede men; men precede institutions. Mind is therefore more important than mechanism. Passionate reformers are always devising new social machinery. The true reformer, while not deprecating this, sees it is secondary. Thought is the principal thing, and it will find its form with organic certainty. Politicians and social reformers fancy they are guiding the world; they seem to, but they are doing nothing of the sort. An original genius—poet, philosopher or scientist—flings a new idea into the public mind. Few notice it, but it works like a germ, and in a hundred, or perhaps a thousand years, it leavens the whole mass. Then it inspires parties and moulds institutions. But the men who reduce it to the concrete are merely its instruments, and not its oracles. Boiler-makers are not Watts, nor are engineers or even railway directors Stephensons.

From Besant (291-92)

[Besant observes toward the beginning of her rejoinder, “I must follow my critic along the path he has traced” (290), and she initially takes him up point by point, quoting and refuting his rash assertions, which he clearly made without really knowing her very well despite the fact that reading her *Autobiographical Sketches* should have given him an

opportunity to do so—as she trenchantly remarks. Thereafter, she gives way to discussing what she considers to be the more “worthy subject of controversy,” namely, Foote’s objections to Socialism.]

The allegation that “she moves in a select circle,” etc., is very funny, but it has the disadvantage of being perfectly inaccurate. My “select circle” cast me out thirteen years ago, and my circle since has embraced “all sorts and conditions of men.” The outside of “a car or an omnibus” is my most common mode of getting about in London, from the morning to midnight; the “crowded third-class carriage” is familiar ground to me; the “common people on Bank holiday” with fifteen in a carriage not unknown; I have “surged in with the pit mob”; I have alas! sat *very* observantly “among the gods and mashers in music halls,” and I don’t like them—they are more hopeless than the rough costermongers I have sat among in the poorest places of amusement. I have done all this that I might judge “how far human nature is capable of immediate elevation,” and I bear witness that the workers who inhabit the slums are less incapable of elevation into the brotherhood contemplated by Socialism, than the vicious vacant-faced swells who use the boxes of the higher-priced music halls for their toying with painted women.

Nor should Mr. Foote forget that before I became a successful writer and speaker, I did a good deal in the way of trying “to earn an ordinary livelihood,” as Mr. Foote might have read in the “Autobiography” he alludes to. I saw a good deal of the sordid side of “the world” when I tramped from shop to shop looking for work; when I dined for sixpence in the grubby little eating houses, with greasy cloth and hastily wiped knife and fork, where a “cut from the joint” may be had for that modest sum. Since I have earned more, my lecturing work has taken me into many a rough quarter, and as a matter of fact my experience of “the world” is perhaps more varied and more wide than that of most men.

From Foote again (294)

[This excerpt constitutes Foote’s opening salvo, the first paragraph of his reply to Besant’s rejoinder, and he now writes at twice the length of her rebuttal, as editor enjoying “the last word.” His “reply” is as much a personal attack as it is an attack on Socialism, and thus it hardly merits being called a review, for her book acts merely as an “occasion” for him to unleash his vituperation. His own language here confirms the language of “attack,” as does the questioning of his being “a sensible man.”]

Mrs. Besant speaks of my “attack” on Socialism and on herself, but there is no justification for the use of this word. She sent me a copy of her *Modern Socialism* for review, and I reviewed it. I devoted to it eight

pages of careful criticism which, rightly considered, is an honor. A sensible man (and I hope I have not forfeited all claim to that title) does not waste his time and brains on what he despises; except, of course in extreme cases, when it becomes a public nuisance. Had I possessed the mean opinion of Mrs. Besant, which she perversely infers from my article, I should not have made her booklet the occasion of some of the most strenuous and earnest pages I have ever penned.

- c. "Foreword" of W.T. Stead, "Mrs. Annie Besant," *The Review of Reviews* 4.22 (October 1891): 349-67; rpt. *Annie Besant: A Character Sketch, 1891* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1946)

[William Thomas Stead (1849-1912) started out his career in journalism by founding and editing the *Northern Echo* in 1871, and he assisted John Morley in editing the *Pall Mall Gazette* for three years prior to assuming its sole editorship (1883-90), after which he inaugurated the *Review of Reviews* (1890-1912). During his tenure as editor of the *PMG*, he published a series of four articles entitled "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon" (July 1885), based on his actual experience of trying to buy a child whose mother willingly sold her into prostitution. Briefly jailed for orchestrating this exposé, he continued his active public career, variously getting involved in American politics, supporting the Salvation Army, and opposing the Boer War. He was considered a likely recipient of the 1912 Nobel Peace Prize before he died that year on board the *Titanic*. Stead became friends with Besant during their joint backing of the "Bloody Sunday" detainees in 1887, and together they published a weekly journal called the *Link* (1888), which was dedicated to promoting the brotherhood of mankind. Although the backers of the *Review of Reviews* were reluctant to have him include Besant among his public well-wishers at the launch of his new periodical, he held his ground and included her salutations in the opening pages of its first issue. The following excerpt is the last paragraph of his foreword.]

One result of the persistent boycott that has been maintained against her so long by the papers is that one of the most charming and pathetic autobiographical sketches in our language is practically non-existent for the great mass of the English-speaking public. Mrs. Besant's fragmentary sketches of her spiritual pilgrimage, although published in 1885, is, I suppose, almost unknown to my readers. The book is out of print, and they will therefore be grateful for the extracts which I shall make freely from its pages. I hope, now the ice has been broken, and the great slow-minded public has wakened up at last to the fact that Mrs. Besant is one of the most remarkable women of our time, she will republish it, with an additional chapter describing the later stages of her pilgrim's progress. An authentic narrative of the soul-journeyings of an intensely religious soul from Evangelicalism to Puseyism, and thence through Broad Church Theism to the flat negations of an Athe-

istic Materialism, out of which she has emerged, by way of Spiritualism, into the realm of Theosophy, is one for which we may search in vain in contemporary religious biography. Such a story could not fail to be full of suggestion in any case, even if the writer were obscure and unknown. How much more interesting, then, must it be when it reaches us from one of the most eloquent of living women, who is still in the zenith of her powers.

2. From Annie Besant, *Why I Don't Believe in God* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1887)

[Excerpting from this pamphlet is a challenge because it forms such a tightly constructed argument; the reader can immediately discern that its rhetoric is designed to persuade an audience, undoubtedly the result of having been delivered first as a speech (as were the majority of Besant's publications). Here we see how Besant is becoming a comparativist regarding religion, prefiguring her role within Theosophy. This is an argument that can be viewed as a product of her many National Secular Society debates as well as those developed by her participation in the Dialectical Society, and it bears comparison with her reasoning process in *Autobiographical Sketches* when she narrates "how I came to not believe in God." Notably she is still trying to be open-minded, and as always she is concerned with "truth." "God" is capitalized but also occurs in the plural, and increasingly she sets the term within quotation marks. Bringing to bear semantics and logic, she introduces science by way of Darwinian formulations about evolution in order to address the question of creation from design. Then she quotes from one of her own scientific pamphlets (from a series of twelve books and manuals on scientific subjects published by the Freethought Publishing Company starting in 1881), building the rest of her argument by demonstration of the evolution of the eye and ear. The time period of this writing corresponds with Besant's university coursework in biology and her teaching of physiology. Interestingly enough, she reinterprets Matthew Arnold's infamous catch-phrase defining God in *Literature and Dogma* (1873), "Not ourselves which makes for righteousness," to support the Darwinian doctrine of survival of the fittest. Enjoining the reader/listener to engage in self-education on all the issues she raises, her final note of optimism acts to counter any sense of nihilism, while her belief in man's evolutionary potential demonstrates her early Theosophical proclivities.]

There is no doubt that the majority of people in most parts of the world—save in those in which Buddhism is supreme—believe in the existence of a God. The kind of God may vary indefinitely, but there is generally "some God or other." Now a growing minority in every civilised country finds it intellectually impossible to make the affirmation which is necessary for belief in God, and this growing minority

includes many of the most thoughtful and most competent minds. The refusal to believe is unfortunately not always public, so cruel is the vengeance worked by society on those who do not bow down to its fetishes; but as John Stuart Mill said: "The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments—of those most distinguished even in popular estimation for wisdom and virtue—are complete sceptics in religion" (Mill, *Autobiography*, p. 45).

It is sad that all should not recognise that, as the late Professor Clifford put it, Truth is a thing to be shouted from the housetops, not to be whispered over the walnuts and wine after the ladies have left; for only by plain and honest speech on this matter can liberty of thought be won. Each who speaks out makes easier speech for others, and none, however insignificant, has right of silence here. Nor is it unfair, I think, that a minority should be challenged on its dissidency, and should be expected to state clearly and definitely the grounds of its disagreement with the majority.

Ere going into detailed argument it may be well to remind the reader that the burden of affording proof lies on the affirmer of a proposition; the rational attitude of the human mind is not that of a boundless credulity, accepting every statement as true until it has been proved to be false, but is that of a suspension of judgment on every statement which, though not obviously false, is not supported by evidence, and of an absolute rejection of a statement self-contradictory in its terms, or incompatible with truths already demonstrated. To remove this position from the region of prejudice in which theological discussion is carried on, it may be well to take the following illustration: a man asks me, "Do you believe that Jupiter is inhabited by a race of men who have one eye in the middle of their foreheads, and who walk about on three legs, with their heads under their left arms?" I answer: "No, I do not believe it; I have no evidence that such beings exist." If my interlocutor desires to convince me that Jupiter has inhabitants, and that his description of them is accurate, it is for him to bring forward evidence in support of his contention. The burden of proof evidently lies on him; it is not for me to prove that no such beings exist before my non-belief is justified, but for him to prove that they do exist before my belief can be fairly claimed. Similarly, it is for the affirmer of God's existence to bring evidence in support of his affirmation; the burden of proof lies on him.

For be it remembered that the Atheist makes no general denial of the existence of God; he does not say, "There is no God." If he put forward such a proposition, which he can only do intelligently if he understand the term "God," then, truly, he would be bound to bring forth his evidence in support. But the proof of a universal negative requires the possession of perfect knowledge of the universe of discourse, and in this case the universe of discourse is coterminous with the totality of existence. No man can rationally affirm "There is no God," until the word "God" has for him a definite meaning, and until everything that exists is known to him, and known with what Leibnitz calls "perfect knowl-

edge." The Atheist's denial of the Gods begins only when these Gods are defined or described. Never yet has a God been defined in terms which were not palpably self-contradictory and absurd; never yet has a God been described so that a concept of him was made possible to human thought. Again I fall back on an illustration unconnected with theology in order to make clearly apparent the distinction drawn. If I am asked: "Do you believe in the existence of a triangle in space on the other side of Saturn?" I answer, "I neither believe in, or deny its existence; I know nothing about it." But if I am asked: "Do you believe in the existence there of a boundless triangle, or of a square triangle?" then my answer is: "I deny the possibility of the existence of such triangles." The reason for the different answers to the two questions is that as I have never visited the other side of Saturn I know nothing about the existence or non-existence of triangles there; but I deny the possibility of the existence of a boundless triangle, because the word triangle means a figure enclosed by three limiting lines; and I deny the possibility of the existence of a square triangle, because a triangle has three sides only while a square has four, and all the angles of a triangle taken together are equal to two right angles, while those of a square are equal to four. I allege that anyone who believes in a square triangle can have no clear concept either of a triangle or of a square. And so while I refuse to say "there is no God," lacking the knowledge which would justify the denial, since to me the word God represents no concept, I do say, "there is no infinite personality, there is no infinite creator, there is no being at once almighty and all-good, there is no Trinity in Unity, there is no eternal and infinite existence save that of which each one of us is made." For be it noted, these denials are justified by our knowledge: an undefined "God" might be a limited being on the far side of Sirius, and I have no knowledge which justifies me in denying such an existence; but an infinite God, *i.e.*, a God who is everywhere, who has no limits, and yet who is not I and who is therefore limited by my personality, is a being who is self-contradictory, both limited and not-limited, and such a being cannot exist. No perfect knowledge is needed here. "God is an infinite being" is disproved by one being who is not God. "God is everywhere" is disproved by the finding of one spot where God is not. The universal affirmative is disproved by a single exception. Nor is anything gained by the assertors of deity when they allege that he is incomprehensible. If "God" exists and is incomprehensible, his incomprehensibility is an admirable reason for being silent about him, but can never justify the affirmation of self-contradictory propositions, and the threatening of people with damnation if they do not accept them. (3-5)

* * *

Now, it may be taken as an undeniable fact that where there is confusion of belief there is deficiency of evidence. Scientific men quarrel and dispute over some much controverted scientific theory. They dispute

because the experimental proofs are lacking that would decide the truth or the error of the suggested hypothesis. While the evidence is unsatisfactory, the controversy continues, but when once decisive proof has been discovered all tongues are still. The endless controversies over the existence of God show that decisive proof has not yet been attained. And while this proof is wanting, I remain Atheist, resolute not to profess belief till my intellect can find some stable ground whereon to rest.

We have reached the last citadel, once the apparently impregnable fortress of Theism, but one whose walls are now crumbling, the argument from design. It was this argument which so impressed John Stuart Mill that he wrote in his Essay on "Theism": "I think it must be allowed that, in the present state of our knowledge, the adaptations in Nature afford a large balance of probability in favor of creation by intelligence. It is equally certain that this is no more than a probability" (*Three Essays on Religion*, p. 174). This Essay was, however, written between the years 1868 and 1870, and at that time the tremendous effect of the hypothesis of evolution had not yet made itself felt; Mill speaks (p. 172) of the "recent speculations" on "the principle of the 'survival of the fittest,'" and recognising that if this principle were sound "there would be a constant though slow general improvement of the type as it branched out into many different varieties, adapting it to different media and modes of existence, until it might possibly, in countless ages, attain to the most advanced examples which now exist" (p. 173), he admits that if this be true "it must be acknowledged that it would greatly attenuate the evidence for" creation. And I am prepared to admit frankly that until the "how" of evolution explained the adaptations in Nature, the weight of the argument from design was very great, and to most minds would have been absolutely decisive. It would not of course prove the existence of an omnipotent and universal creator, but it certainly did powerfully suggest the presence of some contriving intelligence at work on natural phenomena. But now, when we can trace the gradual evolution of a complex and highly developed organ through the various stages which separate its origin from its most complete condition; when we can study the retrogression of organs becoming rudimentary by disuse, and the improvement of organs becoming developed by use; when we notice as imperfections in the higher type things which were essential in the lower: what wonder is it that the instructed can no longer admit the force of the argument from design?

The human eye has often been pointed to as a triumphant proof of design, and it naturally seemed perfect in the past to those who could imagine no higher kind of optical instrument; but now, as Tyndall says, "A long list of indictments might indeed be brought against the eye—its opacity, its want of symmetry, its lack of achromatism, its absolute blindness, in part. All these taken together cause Helmholtz to say that, if any optician sent him an instrument so full of defects, he would be justified in sending it back with the severest censure" (*On Light*, p. 8, ed. 1875). It is only since men have made optical instruments without the faults of

the eye, that we have become aware how much better we might see than we do. Not is this all; the imperfections which would show incompetence on the part of a designer become interesting and significant as traces of gradual development, and the eye, which in the complexity of its highest form seemed, notwithstanding its defects, to demand such great intelligence to conceive and fashion it, becomes more intelligible when we can watch it a-building, and, as it were, see it put together bit by bit. I venture to quote here from a pamphlet of my own a very brief statement of the stages through which the eye has passed in its evolution: "The first definite eye-spot that we yet know of is a little colored speck at the base of the tentacles of some of the Hydromedusae, jelly-fish in common parlance. They are only spots of pigment, and we should not know they were attempts at eyes were it not that some relations, the Discophora, have little refractive bodies in their pigment spots, and these refractive bodies resemble the crystalline cones of animals a little higher in the scale. In the next class (Vermes), including all worms, we find only pigment spots in the lowest; then pigment spots with a nerve-fibre ending in them; pigment spots with rod-shaped cells, with crystalline rods; pigment spots with crystalline cones. Next, the cones begin to be arranged radially; and in the Alciopidae the eye has become a sphere with a lens and a vitreous body, layer of pigment, layer of rods, and optic nerve. To mark the evolution definitely in another way, we find the more highly developed eye of the adult appearing as a pigment spot in the embryo, so that both the evolution of the race, and the evolution of the individual tell the same story. In the Echinoderma (sea-urchins, star-fishes) we find only pigment spots in the lower forms, but in the higher the rod-shaped cells, the transparent cones projecting from pigment cells. In the Arthropoda (lobsters, insects, etc.), the advance continues from the Vermes. The retina is formed more definitely than in the Alciopidae, and the eye becomes more complex. The compound eye is an attempt at grouping many cones together, and is found in the higher members of this sub-kingdom. In the lowest vertebrate, the Amphioxus, the eye is a mere pigment spot, but in the others the more complex forms are taken up and carried on to the comparative perfection of the mammalian eye" (*Eyes and Ears*, pp. 9-10). And be it noted that in the most complex and highly developed eye there is still the same relation of pigment layer, rod layer, cone layer, seen in its earliest beginnings in the Discophora and the worms.

The line of argument here applied to the eye may be followed in every instance of so-called design. The exquisite mechanism of the ear may be similarly traced, from the mere sac with otoliths of the Medusae up to the elaborate external, middle, and internal ears of man. Man's ear is a very complex thing. Its three chambers; the curious characteristics of the innermost of these, with its three "semi-circular canals," its coiled extension, like a snail-shell, called the cochlea, its elaborate nervous mechanism; the membrane between the middle and outer chambers, which vibrates with every pulsation of the air; we can trace all these separate parts as they are added one to one

to the auditory apparatus of the evolving race. If we examine the edge of the "umbrella" of the free-swimming Medusa, we shall find some little capsules containing one or more tiny crystals, the homologues of the inner ear; the lower forms of Vermes have similar ears, and in some there are delicate hairs within the capsule which quiver constantly; the higher worms have these capsules paired and they lie close to a mass of nervous matter. Lobsters and their relations have similar ears, the capsule being sometimes closed and sometimes open. In many insects a delicate membrane is added to the auditory apparatus, and stretches between the vesicle and the outer air, homologue of our membrane. The lower fishes have added one semi-circular canal, the next higher two, and the next higher three: a little expansion is also seen at one part of the vesicle. In the frogs and toads this extension is increased, and in the reptiles and birds it is still larger, and is curled a little at the further end. In the lowest mammals it is still only bent, but in the higher it rolls round on itself and forms the cochlea. The reptiles and birds have the space developed between the vesicle and the membrane, and so acquire a middle ear; the crocodile and the owl show a trace of the external ear, but it is not highly developed till we reach the mammals, and even the lowest mammals, and the aquatic ones, have little of it developed. Thus step by step is the ear built up, until we see it complete as a slow growth, not as an intelligent design.

And if it be asked, how are these changes caused, the answer comes readily: "By variation and by the survival of the fittest." Since organisms and their environments re-act on each other, slight variations are constantly occurring; living organisms are ever in very unstable equilibrium, chemical association and disassociation are continually going on within them. Some of these changes are advantageous to the organism in the struggle for existence; some are indifferent; some are disadvantageous. Those that are advantageous tend to persist, since the organism possessing them is more likely to survive than its less fortunate competitors, and—since variations are transmissible from parents to progeny—to hand on its favorable variation to its young. On the other hand the disadvantageous variations tend to disappear, since the organism which is by them placed at a disadvantage is likely to perish in the fight for food. Here are the mighty forces that cause evolution; here the "not ourselves which makes for righteousness," *i.e.*, for ever-increasing suitability of the organism to its environment.

It is, of course, impossible in so brief a statement as this to do justice to the fulness of the explanation of all cases of apparent design which can be made in this fashion. The thoughtful student must work out the line of argument for himself. Nor must he forget to notice the argument from the *absence* of design, the want of adaptation, the myriad failures, the ineptitudes and incompetences of nature. How, from the point of view of design, can he explain the numerous rudimentary organs in the higher animals? What is the meaning of man's hidden rudimentary tail? of his appendix coeci vermiformis? of the

branchial clefts and the lanugo of the human being during periods of ante-natal life? of the erratic course of the recurrent laryngeal? of the communication between the larynx and the alimentary canal? I might extend the list over a page. The fact that uninstructed people do not appreciate these difficulties offers no explanation to the instructed who feel their force; and the abuse so freely lavished on the Atheist does not carry conviction to the intellect.

I do not believe in God. My mind finds no grounds on which to build up a reasonable faith. My heart revolts against the spectre of an Almighty Indifference to the pain of sentient beings. My conscience rebels against the injustice, the cruelty, the inequality, which surround me on every side. But I believe in Man. In man's redeeming power; in man's remoulding energy; in man's approaching triumph, through knowledge, love, and work. (18-23)

3. From Annie Besant, *Why I Became a Theosophist* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1889)

[Intriguingly, Besant's own Freethought Press still published this pamphlet, and Freethinkers were her target audience, suggesting yet another publication that had its initial incarnation in a speech. This argument looks ahead to her reply to Gladstone's critique of *An Autobiography* in 1895 (see Appendix B). Now she takes up the themes of patience and endurance in the midst of growth and (apparent) change, and she specifically addresses reproaches made by G.W. Foote; for more of Foote's rant in reference to participation in the inner, or Esoteric, circle, see his *Mrs. Besant's Theosophy* (London: Progress Publishing Company, 1889). Besant explains that it is quite possible to be a Theosophist and either a Christian or Freethinker, though in practice Theosophists have found more allies among Freethinkers; the subsequent attacks on Besant by Christian missionaries during her years in India help to confirm that assertion. But here she takes Freethinkers to task for their own narrow-mindedness, utilizing once more her recurrent image of "the Light." She remained sub-editor of the *National Review* until 1891, when Bradlaugh died, and she considered his friendship her greatest loss when she "came over" to Theosophy; see her tribute to him in the following item of this appendix, *1875-1891: Fragment of Autobiography*. Repeatedly "truth" is her keynote, consistent with the language of both *Autobiographical Sketches* and *An Autobiography*. Lines from "Columbus" by the American poet James Russell Lowell (1819-91), one of whose poems she adapts in her *Secular Song and Hymn Book* (1875), sound the opening appeal.]

Endurance is the crowning quality
And patience all the passion of great hearts;
These are their stay, and when the leaden world

Sets its hard face against their fateful thought,
 And brute strength, like a scornful conqueror,
 Clangs his huge mace down in the other scale,
 The inspired soul but flings its patience in,
 And slowly that outweighs the ponderous globe.
 One faith against a whole world's unbelief,
 One soul against the flesh of all mankind.

Growth necessarily implies change, and, provided the change be sequential and of the nature of development, it is but the sign of intellectual life. No one blames the child because it has out-grown its baby-clothes, nor the man when his lad's raiment becomes too narrow for him; but if the mind grows as well as the body, and the intellectual garment of one decade is outgrown in the following, cries are raised of rebuke and of reproach by those who regard fossilisation as a proof of mental strength. Just now from some members of the Freethought party reproaches are being levelled at me because I have proclaimed myself a Theosophist. Yet of all people Freethinkers ought to be the very last to protest against change of opinion *per se*; for almost every one of them is a Freethinker by virtue of mental change, and the only hope of success for their propaganda in a Christian country is that they may persuade others to pass through a similar change. They are continually reproaching Christians in that their minds are not open to argument, will not listen to reason; and yet, if one of themselves sees a further truth and admits it, they object as much to the open mind of the Freethinker as to the closed mind of the Christian. To take up the position assumed by some of my critics is to set up a new infallibility, as indefensible, and less venerable, than that of Rome. It is to claim that the summit of human knowledge has been reached by them, and that all new knowledge is folly. It is to do what Churches in all ages have done, to set up their own petty fences round the field of truth, and in so doing to trace the limits of their own cemeteries. And for the Freethinker to do this is to be false to his creed, and to stain himself with the most flagrant inconsistency; he denounces the immovability of the Church as obstinacy, while he glorifies the immovability of the Freethinker as strength; he blames the one because it shuts its ears against *his* new truth, and then promptly shuts his own ears against new truth from some one else.

Let us distinguish: there is a vacillation of opinion which is a sign of mental weakness, a change which is a turning back. When all the available evidence for a doctrine has been examined, and the doctrine thereupon has been rejected, it shews a mental fault somewhere if that doctrine be again accepted, the evidence remaining the same. It does not, on the other hand, imply any mental weakness, if, on the bringing forward of new evidence which supplies the lacking demonstration, the doctrine previously rejected for lack of such evidence, be accepted. Nor does it imply mental weakness if a doctrine accepted on certain

given evidence, be later given up on additions being made to knowledge. Only in this way is intellectual progress made; only thus, step by step, do we approach the far-off Truth. A Freethinker, who has become one by study and has painfully wrought out his freedom, discarding the various doctrines of Christianity, could not rebelieve them without confessing either that he had been hasty in his rejection or was insecure in his new adhesion: in either case he would have shewn intellectual weakness. But not to the Freethinker can be closed any new fields of mental discovery; not on his limbs shall be welded the fresh fetters of a new orthodoxy, after he has hewn off the links of the elder faith; not round his eyes, facing the sunshine, shall be bound the bandage of a cramping creed; not to him shall Atheism, any more than Theism, say: "Thus far shalt thou think, and no further." Atheism has been his deliverer; it must never be his gaoler: it has freed him; it must never tie him down. Grateful for all it has saved him from, for all it has taught him, for the strength it has given, the energy it has inspired, the eager spirit of man yet rushes onward, crying: "The Light is beyond!"

I maintain, then, that the Freethinker is bound ever to keep open a window towards new light, and to refuse to pull down his mental blinds. Freethought, in fact, is an intellectual state, not a creed; a mental attitude, not a series of dogmas. No one turns his back on Freethought who subjects every new doctrine to the light of reason, who weighs its claims without prejudice, and accepts or rejects it out of loyalty to truth alone. It seems necessary to recall this fundamental truth about Freethought, in protest against the position taken up by some of my critics, who would fain identify a universal principle with a special phase of nineteenth century Materialism. The temple of Freethought is not identical with the particular niche in which they stand. (3-5)

* * *

Before showing the method suggested in Theosophical teachings for obtaining light on the above questions, or sketching the view of the universe given by occult science, it may be well to remove some misconceptions concerning the Theosophical Society, my adhesion to which has brought on my devoted head such voluminous upbraiding. I fear that the objects of the Society will come somewhat as an anticlimax after the denunciations. They are three in number, and any one who asks for admittance to the Society must approve the first of these:

1. To be the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood.
2. To promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literatures, religions, and sciences.
3. To investigate unexplained laws of nature and the psychical powers latent in man.

Nothing more! Not a word of any form of belief; no imposition of any special views as to the universe or man; nothing about Mahatmas, cycles, Karma or anything else. Atheist and Theist, Christian and Hindu, Mahomedan and Secularist, all can meet on this one broad platform, and none has the right to look askance at another.

The answer to the inquiry, "Why did you join the Society?" is very simple. There is sore need, it seems to me, in our unbrotherly, anti-social civilisation, of this distinct affirmation of a brotherhood as broad as Humanity itself. Granted that it is as yet but a beautiful Ideal, it is well that such an Ideal should be lifted up before the eyes of men. Not only so, but each who affirms that ideal, and tries to conform thereto his own life, does something, however little, to lift mankind towards its realisation, to hasten the coming of that Day of Man. Again, the third object is one that much attracts me. The desire for knowledge is wrought deep into the heart of every earnest student, and for many years the desire to search out the forces that lie latent in and around us has been very present to me. I can see in that desire nothing unworthy of a Freethinker, nothing to be ashamed of as a searcher after truth. "We seek for Truth" is the motto of the National Secular Society, and that motto, to me, has been no lip-phrase. (13-14)

* * *

Theosophy further teaches, in connexion with man, that he may develop by suitable means not only the psychic qualities of which glimpses are given in the abnormal manifestations before alluded to, but power over matter far greater than he at present possesses, and psychic abilities in comparison with which those now looming before us are but as the capacities of infants to those of grown men. In the slow evolution of the human race these qualities will gradually unfold themselves; further, they may be, so to say, "forced" by any who choose to take the requisite means. And here comes in the asceticism to which Mr. Foote so vehemently objects; he declares that the acceptance of celibacy by an individual for a definite object implies that "Marriage is now a mere concession to human weakness. Celibacy is the counsel of perfection. The sacred names of husband and wife, father and mother, are to be deposed as usurpers. At the very best they are only to be tolerated. It is idle to reply that celibacy is only for the 'inner circle.' If it be the loftiest rule of life, it should be aimed at by all." With all due respect to Mr. Foote, his denunciation savors somewhat of clap-trap, though well calculated to appeal to the ordinary British Philistine of Mr. Matthew Arnold. No one wants to depose any names, sacred or otherwise, as usurpers. It sounds rather small after this tremendous oburgation, but all the Theosophist says is, if you want to obtain a certain thing you must use certain means; as who should say, if you want to swim across that swift current you must take off your coat. But if it be good, should not everyone try for it? Not necessarily. Music is very good, but I

should be a fool to practise eight hours a day if I had but small talent for it; if I have great talent, and want to become a great artist, I must sacrifice for it many of the ordinary joys of life; but is that to say that every boy and girl must fling aside every duty of life and practise incessantly, without the slightest regard to anything else? Only one out of millions has the capacity for that swift development to which allusion is made, and celibacy is one of the smallest of the sacrifices it demands for its realisation. The spiritual genius, like other geniuses, will have its way, but Mr. Foote need not fear that it will become too common, and Theosophy does not advise celibacy to those not on fire with its flame. (25-26)

* * *

One last word to my Secularist friends. If you say to me, "Leave our ranks," I will leave them; I force myself on no party, and the moment I feel myself unwelcome I will go. It has cost me pain enough and to spare to admit that the Materialism from which I hoped all has failed me, and by such admission to bring upon myself the disapproval of some of my nearest friends. But here, as at other times in my life, I dare not purchase peace with a lie. An imperious necessity forces me to speak the truth as I see it, whether the speech please or displease, whether it bring praise or blame. That one loyalty to truth I must keep stainless, whatever friendships fail me or human ties be broken. She may lead me into the wilderness, but I must follow her; she may strip me of all love, but I must pursue her; though she slay me, yet will I trust in her; and I ask no other epitaph on my tomb, but

SHE TRIED TO FOLLOW TRUTH.

(31)

4. From Annie Besant, 1875 to 1891: *A Fragment of Autobiography* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1891)

[This is the text of what Besant delivered as her farewell address to Materialists at the Hall of Science on August 30, 1891, Mrs. Thornton Smith presiding. It was variously reported that the speaker was "greeted with most cordial and prolonged cheers," in accord with Elizabeth Robins's impressions; see her unpublished remarks in her unfinished biography of Besant at the Fales Library, New York University. In many respects, this text reads like a mini-autobiography of Besant as well as a preview of *An Autobiography*, providing information that fills in some of the gaps for those unfamiliar with *Autobiographical Sketches*. (Stead's character sketch, cited in the first section of this appendix, was two months still to come.) This pamphlet is also a continuation of *Why I Became a Theosophist* in terms of addressing Free-thinkers on the question of their open-mindedness. Besant here affirms the Freethought principle of her right to speak what she thinks is true,

and she pointedly cites the efforts to censor her, particularly those spearheaded by G.W. Foote. Returning to the image of "light," early and late, she exercises the rhetorical skills of an accomplished speaker; this speech confirms the tributes to her oratorical command made alike by Shaw, Stead, and Bradlaugh. Besant's future addresses in London would be from the platforms of Queen's Hall and Albert Hall, sometimes to enormous crowds.]

On the 28th of February, 1875, I stood for the first time on the platform of the Hall of Science to speak from that platform to a Freethought audience. I spoke then, announced under my own name, but with another name added thereto—one under which, since the preceding August, I had written in the *National Reformer*. It was the name of "Ajax," and I used that name for writing in the *Reformer* because when the darkness came down upon him and his army, the words which were said to have broken from his lips expressed my own feeling then, as they express it now. Out of the darkness and the danger, his voice is said to have rung over the battle-field, "Light, more light." It is that cry for "light" which has been the keynote of my own intellectual life, then and ever since, light—whithersoever the light may take one; light, through whatever difficulties the light may lead one; light, although in its brightness it should blast the eyes that gaze upon it: I would rather be blinded by the light, than sit wilfully in the twilight or the dark. Months before—in the August of the preceding year—I had come to the Hall for the first time to receive my certificate of entrance into the National Secular Society. I received it then from the greatest president that Society has had or is likely to have. From that time there dated a friendship to which no words of mine can do justice, or speak the gratitude I feel—a friendship that was only broken by the grave. Had he lived, this lecture would, probably, not have needed to be given, for, if there was one thing Charles Bradlaugh did, it was to keep free the platform which was given him in charge; and to permit no test of doctrine or of belief to claim a right to bar the platform that was *free* in name and in deed as well. I pass hurriedly over many years, taking but one point after another that seems to me to be of interest in the retrospect to-night. Not very long after I came on to this platform, in the May following, I was elected a vice-president of the National Secular Society, and that position I laid down when the late president gave up his office. I began my service in the Society under him, and I could serve under no lesser man. From that time forward—from the time, that is, of the commencement of my service—I constantly occupied the platform here and elsewhere. And they were rougher days then with the Freethought party in the provinces, than those they have now to face. During my first year of lecturing work I can remember some rough scenes that now it would not be easy to parallel. Stones that were thrown as the most potent argument to use against a lecturer, even though that lecturer were a woman; the broken windows of a hall; a bruised neck at one

place; a walk through waving sticks and cursing crowd at another place—these were the kind of arguments which Christians were readier to use then than they are now. The party has grown very much stronger during the sixteen and a half years which have passed from then to now. I well remember, looking backward, and recalling incident after incident that marked those passing years, the memorable Conference in 1876, when there was present on the platform a miner of Yorkshire who, a member of the Society and an Atheist, was the first to spring into a cage to go down where 143 of his comrades lay dead and others were in danger of death after a colliery explosion—the cage into which none dared to spring until the Atheist set the example and stimulated the courage of others. My experience in the National Secular Society has taught me that you may have the most splendid courage, the most absolute self-devotion, the most heroic self-sacrifice, that those virtues can exist without possessing faith in God or belief in a hereafter: they are, indeed, the flowers of man's nature springing up fragrant and beautiful in every creed and in none.

It was not long after my entrance into the National Secular Society—a little more than two brief years—that that struggle came upon us in which Charles Bradlaugh and myself defended the right to publish, at a cheap rate, information which we believed to be useful to the masses of the poor and of the weak. What the upshot of that struggle was you all know. How bitter the struggle was some of you, perchance, may have gauged. I, who went through it, know its results were that no amount of slander or abuse could hereafter make much difference, when one thought it right to take a particular line of conduct; for in the years that followed that trial there were no words too foul, no epithets too vile, to be used in Christian and in Freethought journals, against my co-defendant and myself. When one has once been through that fire of torture, when everything that man and woman hold dear, fame, good name, reputation, character, and all else—when all have been sullied, slandered and maligned, after such a hammering all subsequent attacks seem but poor and feeble, and no words of reproach or unkindness that later can be used avail to touch a courage that has held through trials such as that. And I do not regret (I never have regretted and don't now) the steps that then I took, for I know that both in the eyes of the wise to-day, and in the verdict of history that in centuries to come shall judge our struggles, the verdict that then shall be given will not be given on what one has believed but on how one has worked; and I know that though one's eyes may often be blinded, and one's efforts wrong, the courage that dares to speak, the courage that dares to stand—those are the things that men remember, and if you can never write “coward” on man or woman's grave, their place is safe in the hearts of men, whether their views are blessed or banned in days to come. (3-5)

★ ★ ★

...The reason that this is my last lecture in this hall is because the condition which was placed upon my coming on the platform, after the hall passes into the hands of the National Secular Society, is that I shall not in my lectures say anything that goes against the principles and objects of the society. Now, I will never speak under such conditions. I did not break with the great Church of England, and ruin my social position, and break with all that women hold dear, in order to come to this platform and be dictated to as to what I should say. Your great leader would never have done it. Imagine Charles Bradlaugh standing upon this platform and when he went up to the room of the Committee of the National Secular Society their coming to him and saying, "You should not have said so and so in your lecture." And do you suppose that I, who have spoken on this platform so long, will place myself in that position? Mind, I do not deny the right of your society to do it. I do not challenge the right of your society, or any other, to make any conditions it pleases round its platform. You have exactly the right that every church and sect has to say, "This is my creed and, unless you accept it, you shall not speak within my walls." You have the right; but, O my friends and brothers, is it wise? Think. I have no word to-day to say against the society; no word to say against its committee; but I have sat upon that committee for many a year, and I know on it are many young men sent up by their societies—when they have only been members a very short time—to take part in the deliberations. Are these young fellows, who are not my equals in training or knowledge, of the world, of history or theology—are they to have the right to come and say to me, when I leave the platform, "Your lecture went beyond the limits of the principles and objects of our society?" It is not thus I hold the position of public teacher, of a public speaker. I will only speak from a platform where I may say what I believe to be true. Whether it be true or not, it is my right to speak it; whether it be correct or not, it is my right to submit it to a tribunal of my fellows. But you, what is it you are saying? That you will have no word from your platform save that which you already know, echoing back from your brains to the brain of the speaker the truth you have already discovered. While one more truth remains in the universe to be discovered, you do wrong to bar your platform. Truth is mightier than our wildest dreamings; deeper than our longest plummet-line; higher than our loftiest soarings; grander than you and I can even imagine to-day. What are we? People of a moment. Do you think centuries hence, millenniums hence, your principles and objects will count in the truth which our race then will know? Why bar your platform? If you are right, discussion will not shake your truth. If you are right, you ought to be strong enough to hear a lecturer put views you don't agree with. I never dreamt that from this platform, identified with struggles for human liberty, a platform on which I have stood with half the world against me, I never thought I should be excluded from it by the barrier of objects already accepted; and while I admit your right to do it, I

sorely misdoubt the wisdom of the judgment that so decides. In bidding you farewell, I have no words save words of gratitude to say in this hall; for well I know that for seventeen years I have met with a kindness that has never changed, a loyalty that has never broken, a courage that has always been ready to stand by me and defend me. Without your help I had been crushed many a year ago; without the love you gave me, my heart would have been broken many long years since. But not even for love of you shall gag be placed upon my mouth; not even for your sake will I promise not to speak of that which I know to be true. Although my knowledge may be mistaken, it is knowledge to me. As long as I have it, I should commit the worst treachery to truth and conscience if I allowed anyone to stand between my right to speak that which I believe I have found to those who are willing to listen to me. And so, henceforth, I must speak in other halls than this; henceforth in this hall—identified to me with so much of struggle, so much of pain, so much of the strongest joy that anyone can know—after having tried to be faithful, after having struggled to be true, henceforth in this hall my voice will not again be heard. To you, friends and comrades of so many years, of whom I have spoken no harsh word since I left you, and of whom through all the years to come no words save of gratitude shall ever pass my lips—to you, friends and comrades, I must say farewell, going out into a life that is shorn indeed of its friends, but has on it that light of duty which is the pole-star of every true conscience and brave heart. I know—as far as human being can know—that Those to Whom I have pledged my faith and service are true and pure and great. I would not have left your platform had I not been compelled; but if I must be silent on what I know to be true, then I must take my dismissal, and to you now, and for the rest of this life, to you I bid—FAREWELL.

[Author's note]: As attempts are being made to misrepresent what is above said, I add here that the above farewell was meant, as was plainly said, to the Hall of Science and its audience. In future, as since May, 1889, when I joined the Theosophical Society, I shall speak to any Branches of the National Secular Society, as I do to Spiritualists and others with whom I disagree, so long as they do not claim a censorship over what I say. (12-14)

Appendix B: Publication of An Autobiography (1893) and Critical Response

1. "Preface" to *An Autobiography* (London: T. Fisher, 1893), 5-6

[*An Autobiography* provides nine photographic illustrations and a list of books quoted from as well as an index. Its chapter titles are little more than labels: i. "Out of the Everywhere into the Here"; ii. Early Childhood; iii. Girlhood; iv. Marriage; v. The Storm of Doubt; vi. Charles Bradlaugh; vii. Atheism as I Knew and Taught It; viii. At Work; ix. The Knowlton Pamphlet; x. At War All Around; xi. Mr. Bradlaugh's Struggle; xii. Still Fighting; xiii. Socialism; xiv. Through Storm to Peace. The image of "light" comes to the fore in the preface, which concludes in the ringing language of a Modernist manifesto. Not only does the preface consist of one long paragraph but it also comprises just four sentences, which build in length until the last periodic sentence containing 163 words. The text recalls the mode not only of a public speaker but also of a preacher (the Reverend Martin Luther King comes to mind); after all, Besant first tried her "public" voice by speaking from the pulpit of her husband's empty church. The preface is dated August 1893 from her home, which was later the headquarters of the Theosophical Society, at 17 & 18 Avenue Road, Regent's Park, London.]

It is a difficult thing to tell the story of a life, and yet more difficult when that life is one's own. At the best, the telling has a savour of vanity, and the only excuse for the proceeding is that the life, being an average one, reflects many others, and in troublous times like ours may give experience of many rather than of one. And so the autobiographer does his work because he thinks that, at the cost of some unpleasantness to himself, he may throw light on some of the typical problems that are vexing the souls of his contemporaries, and perchance may stretch out a helping hand to some brother who is struggling in the darkness, and so bring him cheer when despair has him in the grip. Since all of us, men and women of this restless and eager generation—surrounded by forces we dimly see but cannot as yet understand, discontented with old ideas and half afraid of new, greedy for the material results of the knowledge brought us by Science but looking askance at her agnosticism as regards the soul, fearful of superstition but still more fearful of atheism, turning from the husks of outgrown creeds but filled with desperate hunger for spiritual ideals—since all of us have the same anxieties, the same griefs, the same yearning hopes, the same passionate desire for knowledge, it may well be that the story

of one may help all, and that the tale of one soul that went out alone into the darkness and on the other side found light, that struggled through the Storm and on the other side found Peace, may bring some ray of light and of peace into the darkness and the storm of other lives.

2. Selected parallel passages and entries from new sections

a. Parallel passages (to *Autobiographical Sketches*)

[The following passages from *An Autobiography* can be profitably compared with key ones in *Autobiographical Sketches* on a series of subjects and issues, namely, on the Irish and mysticism, Besant's preparation for marriage, her "first lecture," and the outcome of her custody trial. Pagination in brackets is to the 1893 edition.]

On the Irish and mysticism

For as a child I was mystical and imaginative religious to the very finger-tips, and with a certain faculty for seeing visions and dreaming dreams. This faculty is not uncommon with the Keltic races, and makes them seem "superstitious" to more solidly-built peoples. Thus, on the day of my father's funeral, my mother sat with vacant eyes and fixed pallid face—the picture comes back to me yet, it so impressed my childish imagination—following the funeral service, stage after stage, and suddenly, with the words, "It is all over!" fell back fainting. (A24-25; compare with p. 65 and its couching terms of "unspeakable terror" and subsequent labelling of "curious psychological problem.")

Added final frame

I do not mention these stories because they are in any fashion remarkable or out of the way, but only to show that the sensitiveness to impressions other than physical ones, that was a marked feature in my own childhood, was present also in the family to which I belonged. For the physical nature is inherited from parents, and sensitiveness to psychic impressions is a property of the physical body; in our family, as in so many Irish ones, belief in "ghosts" of all descriptions was general, and my mother has told me of the banshee that she had heard wailing when the death-hour of one of the family was near. To me in my childhood, elves and fairies of all sorts were very real things, and my dolls were as really children as I was myself a child. Punch and Judy were living entities, and the tragedy in which they bore part cost me many an agony of tears; to this day I can remember running away when I heard the squawk of the coming Punch, and burying my head in the pillows that I might shut out the sound of the blows and the cry of the ill-used baby. All the objects about me were to me alive, the flowers that I kissed as much as the kitten I petted, and I used to have a splendid time "making believe" and living out all sorts of lovely stories among my treasured and so-called inanimate playthings. But there was

a more serious side to this dreamful fancy when it joined hands with religion. (A27-28)

On her preparation for marriage

So I married in the winter of 1867 with no more idea of the marriage relation than if I had been four years old instead of twenty. My dreamy life, into which no knowledge of evil had been allowed to penetrate, in which I had been guarded from all pain, shielded from all anxiety, kept innocent on all questions of sex, was no preparation for married existence, and left me defenceless to face a rude awakening. Looking back on it all, I deliberately say that no more fatal blunder can be made than to train a girl to womanhood in ignorance of all life's duties and burdens, and then to let her face them for the first time away from all the old associations, the old helps, the old refuge on the mother's breast. That "perfect innocence" may be very beautiful, but it is a perilous possession, and Eve should have the knowledge of good and evil ere she wanders forth from the paradise of a mother's love. Many an unhappy marriage dates from its very beginning, from the terrible shock to a young girl's sensitive modesty and pride, her helpless bewilderment and fear. Men, with their public school and college education, or the knowledge that comes by living in the outside world, may find it hard to realise the possibility of such infantile ignorance in many girls. None the less, such ignorance is a fact in the case of some girls at least, and no mother should let her daughter, blindfold, slip her neck under the marriage yoke. (A70-71; compare with pp. 98-99.)

On her "first lecture"

The spring of 1873 brought me knowledge of a power that was to mould much of my future life. I delivered my first lecture, but delivered it to rows of empty pews in Sibsey Church. A queer whim took me that I would like to know how "it felt" to preach, and vague fancies stirred in me that I could speak if I had the chance. I saw no platform in the distance, nor had any idea of possible speaking in the future dawned upon me. But the longing to find outlet in words came upon me, and I felt as though I had something to say and was able to say it. So locked alone in the great, silent church, whither I had gone to practise some organ exercises, I ascended the pulpit steps and delivered my first lecture on the Inspiration of the Bible. I shall never forget the feeling of power and delight—but especially of power—that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles, the passion in me broke into balanced sentences and never paused for musical cadence or for rhythmical expression. All I wanted then was to see the church full of upturned faces, alive with throbbing sympathy, instead of the dreary emptiness of silent pews. And as though in a dream the solitude was peopled, and I saw the listening faces and the eager eyes, and as the sentences flowed unbidden from my lips and my own tones echoed back to me from the pillars of the ancient church, I knew of a verity

that the gift of speech was mine, and that if ever—and then it seemed so impossible!—if ever the chance came to me of public work, this power of melodious utterance should at least win hearing for any message I had to bring. (A115-16; compare for near exactness to pp. 136-37; the paragraph that follows is verbatim for each version, with only minor changes in punctuation.)

On the outcome of her custody trial

One thing I gained in the Court of Appeal. The Court expressed a strong view as to my right of access, and directed me to apply to Sir George Jessel for it, adding that it could not doubt he would grant it. Under cover of this I applied to the Master of the Rolls, and obtained liberal access to the children; but I found that my visits kept Mabel in a continual state of longing and fretting for me, while the ingenious forms of petty insult that were devised against me and used in the children's presence would soon become palpable to them and cause continual pain. So, after a painful struggle with myself, I resolved to give up the right of seeing them, feeling that thus only could I save them from constantly recurring conflict, destructive of all happiness and of all respect for one or the other parent. Resolutely I turned my back on them that I might spare them trouble, and determined that, robbed of my own, I would be a mother to all helpless children I could aid, and cure the pain at my own heart by soothing the pain of others. (A219-20, the culminating paragraph to her eight-page discussion of the custody trial, which appears mid-way through Chapter IX, otherwise devoted to—and titled—the Knowlton trial; compare to pp. 248-49, the penultimate paragraph of this text.)

Additional commentary regarding her children

As for the children, what was gained by their separation from me? The moment they were old enough to free themselves, they came back to me, my little girl's too brief stay with me being ended by her happy marriage, and I fancy the fears expressed for her eternal future will prove as groundless as the fears for her temporal ruin have proved to be! Not only so, but both are treading in my steps as regards their views of the nature and destiny of man, and have joined in their bright youth the Theosophical Society to which, after so many struggles, I won my way. (A225; compare to the rhetoric of this text's final paragraph, pp. 249-50.)

b. Entries from new sections in *An Autobiography*

[As I discuss in my general introduction, additional chapters focus on and bring up to date Besant's efforts to obtain a science degree (ch. x), Bradlaugh's struggle to take his seat in Parliament (ch. xi), Besant's continued battles as a publishing Secularist (ch. xii), her growing commitment to Socialism and consequent estrangement from Bradlaugh

(ch. xiii), and her conversion to Theosophy (ch. xiv). As with *Autobiographical Sketches*, she includes a lot of self-quotation from her various publications, increasingly Theosophical ones as she approaches the end of her story. Moreover, we can see that she now recognizes how her Socialist concerns begin to prefigure her Theosophical vision for a future world without poverty and governed by love of one's fellow man.]

From Chapter X ("At War All Around")

[On returning to work after a "long and dangerous illness" following the loss of custody of her daughter in 1878]

But I found that in my reading I developed a tendency to let my thoughts wander from the subject in hand, and that they would drift after my lost little one, so I resolved to fill up the gaps in my scientific education, and to amuse myself by reading up for some examinations; I thought it would serve as an absorbing form of recreation from my other work, and would at the same time, by making my knowledge exact, render me more useful as a speaker on behalf of the causes to which my life was given.... And here let me say to any one in mental trouble, that they might find an immense relief in taking up some intellectual recreation of this kind; during that spring [of 1879], in addition to my ordinary work of writing, lecturing, and editing—and the lecturing meant travelling from one end of England to the other—I translated a fair-sized French volume, and had the wear-and-tear of pleading my [repeal] case for the custody of my daughter before the Master of the Rolls; and I found it the very greatest relief to turn to algebra, geometry, and physics, and forget the harassing legal struggles in wrestling with formulae and problems. (A246-47)

From Chapter XI ("Mr. Bradlaugh's Struggle")

[On Charles Bradlaugh's first election to Parliament in 1880, six years before he was finally allowed to take his seat by affirmation of allegiance instead of by taking the biblical oath]

And now silence sank, and we knew the moment had come, and we held our breath, and then—a roar, a wild roar of joy and exultation, cheer after cheer, ringing, throbbing, pealing, and then the mighty surge of the crowd bringing him back, their member at last waving hats, handkerchiefs, a very Madness of tumultuous delight, and the shrill strains of "Bradlaugh for Northampton!" with a ring of triumph in them they had never had before.... How they loved him, how they joyed in the triumph won after twelve years of strife. Ah me! we thought the struggle over, and it was only beginning; we thought our hero victorious, and a fiercer, crueller fight lay in front. True, he was to win that fight, but his life was to be the price of the winning; victory for him was to be final, complete, but the laurel-wreath was to fall upon a grave. (A253-54)

From Chapter XII ("Still Fighting")

[On the launching of her monthly journal, *Our Corner*]

Among the new literary ventures that followed on our taking the large publishing premises in Fleet Street was a sixpenny magazine, edited by myself, and entitled *Our Corner*; its first number was dated January, 1883, and for six years it appeared regularly, and served me as a useful mouthpiece in my Socialist and Labour propagandist work. Among its contributors were Moncure D. Conway, Professor Ludwig Büchner, Yves Guyot, Professor Ernst Haeckel, G. Bernard Shaw, Constance Naden, Dr. Aveling, J.H. Levy, J.L. Joynes, Mrs. Edgren, John Robertson, and many another, Charles Bradlaugh and I writing regularly each month. (A286-87)

From Chapter XIII ("Socialism")

[On Socialists and George Bernard Shaw]

When I came to know them better, I found that the bulk of their speakers were very young men, overworked and underpaid, who spent their scanty leisure in efforts to learn, to educate themselves, to train themselves, and I learned to pardon faults which grew out of the bitter sense of injustice, and which were due largely to the terrible pressure of our system on characters not yet strong enough—how few are strong enough!—to bear grinding injustice without loss of balance and of impartiality. None save those who have worked with them know how much of real nobility, of heroic self-sacrifice, of constant self-denial, of brotherly affection, there is among the Social Democrats. At this time also I met George Bernard Shaw, one of the most brilliant of Socialist writers and most provoking of men; a man with a perfect genius for "aggravating" the enthusiastically earnest, and with a passion for representing himself as a scoundrel. (A302-03)

[Close of self-quotation from one of her own articles in *Our Corner*]

Passing out of the slums into the streets of the town, only a few steps separating the horror and the beauty, I felt, with a vividness more intense than ever, the fearful contrasts between the lots of men; and with more pressing urgency the question seemed to ring in my ears, "Is there no remedy? Must there always be rich and poor?" Some say that it must be so; that the palace and the slum will for ever exist as the light and the shadow. Not so do I believe. I believe that the poverty is the result of ignorance and of bad social arrangements, and that therefore it may be eradicated by knowledge and by social change. I admit that for many of these adult dwellers in the slums there is no hope. Poor victims of a civilisation that hides its brutality beneath a veneer of culture and of grace, for them individually there is, alas! no salvation. But for their children, yes! (A309)

[On Fabian Socialism]

Because it was less hotly antagonistic to the Radicals than the other Socialist organisations, I joined the Fabian Society.... [B]y treating the

Radical as the unevolved Socialist rather than as the anti-Socialist, we gradually won him over to Socialist views.... That the London working classes to-day are so largely Socialist is greatly due to the years of work done among them by members of the Fabian Society, as well as to the splendid, if occasionally too militant, energy of the Social Democratic Federation, and to the devotion of that noble and generous genius, William Morris. (A310-11)

[Apostrophe to those for whom she wished to engage in self-sacrifice]
O blind and mighty people, how my heart went out to you; trampled on, abused, derided, asking so little and needing so much; so pathetically grateful for the pettiest services; so loving and so loyal to those who offered you but their poor services and helpless love. Deeper and deeper into my innermost nature ate the growing desire to succour, to suffer for, to save. I had long given up my social reputation, I now gave up with ever-increasing surrender ease, comfort, time; the passion of pity grew stronger and stronger, fed by each new sacrifice, and each sacrifice led me nearer and nearer to the threshold of that gateway beyond which stretched a path of renunciation I had never dreamed of, which those might tread who were ready wholly to strip off self for Man's sake, who for Love's sake would surrender Love's return from those they served, and would go out into the darkness for themselves that they might, with their own souls as fuel, feed the Light of the World. (A317-18)

From Chapter XIV ("Through Storm to Peace")

[On her current awareness of her relentless but unconscious movement toward Theosophy]

How unconsciously I was marching towards the Theosophy which was to become the glory of my life, groping blindly in the darkness for that very brotherhood, definitely formulated on these very lines by those Elder Brothers of our race, at whose feet I was so soon to throw myself. How deeply this longing for something loftier than I had yet found had wrought itself into my life, how strong the conviction was growing that there was something to be sought to which the service of man was the road, may be seen in [my article "The Army of the Commonwealth" in *Our Corner*]. (A330, in reference to OC 11.2 [February 1888]: 115-21)

[On her growing desire for something more encompassing than what Socialism provided as an answer to societal afflictions]

Thus was ushered in 1889, the to me never-to-be forgotten year in which I found my way "Home," and had the priceless good fortune of meeting, and of becoming the pupil of, H.P. Blavatsky. Ever more and more had been growing on me the feeling that something more than I had was needed for the cure of social ills. The Socialist position sufficed on the economic side, but where to gain the inspiration, the

motive, which should lead to the realisation of the Brotherhood of Man? Our efforts to really organize bands of unselfish workers had failed. Much indeed had been done, but there was not a real movement of self-sacrificing devotion, in which men worked for love's sake only, and asked but to give, not to take. Where was the material for the nobler Social Order, where the hewn stones for the building of the Temple of Man? A great despair would oppress me as I sought for such a movement and found it not. (A338-39)

[On her 1889 assignment to read and review for William Stead in the *Pall Mall Gazette* H.P. Blavatsky's two-volume text entitled *The Secret Doctrine*]

Home I carried my burden, and sat me down to read. As I turned over page after page the interest became absorbing; but how familiar it seemed; how my mind leapt forward to presage the conclusions, how natural it was, how coherent, how subtle, and yet how intelligible. I was dazzled, blinded by the light in which disjointed facts were seen as parts of a mighty whole, and all my puzzles, riddles, problems, seemed to disappear. The effect was partially illusory in one sense, in that they all had to be slowly unravelled later, the brain gradually assimilating that which the swift intuition had grasped as truth. But the light had been seen, and in that flash of illumination I knew that the weary search was over and the very Truth was found. (A340)

[On the charge that she came to Theosophy in a sudden conversion] I have been told that I plunged headlong into Theosophy and let my enthusiasm carry me away. I think that the charge is true, in so far as the decision was swiftly taken; but it had been long led up to, and realised the dreams of childhood on the higher planes of intellectual womanhood. And let me here say that more than all I hope for in that first plunge has been realised, and a certainty of knowledge has been gained on doctrines seen as true as that swift flash of illumination. (A345)

[Final paragraph]

And thus I came through storm to peace, not to the peace of an untroubled sea of outer life, which no strong soul can crave, but to an inner peace that outer troubles may not avail to ruffle—a peace which belongs to the eternal not to the transitory, to the depths not to the shallows of life. It carried me scatheless through the terrible spring of 1891, when death struck down Charles Bradlaugh in the plenitude of his usefulness and unlocked the gateway into rest for H.P. Blavatsky. Through anxieties and responsibilities heavy and numerous it has borne me; every strain makes it stronger; every trial makes it serener; every assault leaves it more radiant. Quiet confidence has taken the place of doubt; a strong security the place of anxious dread. In life, through death, to life, I am but the servant of the great Brotherhood,

and those on whose heads but for the moment the touch of the Master has rested in blessing can never again look upon the world save through eyes made luminous with the radiance of the Eternal Peace.

PEACE TO ALL BEINGS.

(A363-64)

3. Reviews of *An Autobiography*

[*An Autobiography* was broadly reviewed in a timely manner by the periodical press; these four examples are fairly representative of the dozen or so that are cited by Sally Blazer in her dissertation, “‘Conventional Proprieties’: Reception, Marketing, and Editing of Late-Victorian Autobiographies by Women” (Boston University, 1999). Most reviewers alternated personal attack with begrudging praise for Besant’s persistence and work ethic, anticipating the kind of mixed messages later delivered by many of her twentieth-century biographers, primarily West, Besterman, Williams, Nethercot, and Taylor. Victorian reviewers habitually reproduced long quotations from the texts under review, and in this case I have chosen to include them because they provide additional passages for comparison with the text of *Autobiographical Sketches* (I enclose in brackets the pagination to the 1893 edition). None of the reviews I encountered displayed familiarity with *Autobiographical Sketches*, and their internal contradictions reflect how Besant’s general reputation variously affected the reception of her work.]

- a. Unsigned review, “Mrs. Besant’s Apologia,” *The Westminster Budget* 2.47 (22 December 1893): 22-23

[Apart from Gladstone’s review-essay published the following year, this is the longest—and probably the fairest—review of *An Autobiography*. Appearing at the head of Christmas week, it was the lead article under the banner “The World of Letters.” In general, it marks a genuine attempt to come to terms with Besant, and it even reproduces three of the portraits from the text (Besant with Blavatsky’s ring; Bradlaugh and Henry Labouchère, the MPs for Northampton; and the famous photograph of Blavatsky staring straight into the camera). Nonetheless, in an effort to analyze and categorize its complex subject, the reviewer falls prey to unfortunate phrasing like “soul-wobblings,” seeing Besant as the passive tool of others, and dares to predict that she will turn Catholic. The weekly *Westminster Budget* (1893-1920) was attached to its parent daily newspaper, the influential *Westminster Gazette*.]

Mrs. Besant’s Soul has been a good deal *exploité* of late, the Theosophists having worked her conversion to the Blavatsky cult “for all it was

worth,” and it may be as well to explain at the outset that in this interesting volume the discussion of “How I Became a Theosophist” is kept down to a single brief chapter at the end. For ourselves, we do not feel that Mrs. Besant’s apology for the egotism of talking and writing so much about herself is more than conventionally needed. It is characteristic of the times we live in that we are all dreadfully self-conscious about our own souls and inquisitive about each other’s. “Soul-wobblings” are the rage in fiction, and if the public is content to study what Mr. Short-house thinks might have been somebody else’s soul-wobblings between Puritanism and Romanism, and what Mrs. Humphrey Ward thinks might have been somebody else’s soul-wobblings between Anglicanism and Agnosticism, surely that same public may find time to hear what those of Mrs. Besant, a living and active contemporary human being, actually were, among the religious and political extremes of our own day. Besides, Mrs. Besant has left her mark on her time—several marks, in fact, differing largely, nay, passionately, from one another, but each in its day made with undeniable force and distinctness. To Society her name may suggest only a female agitator, about whom it seems to remember once having heard something “shocking.” To other persons who may fancy themselves representatives of the Women’s Movement, or the Democratic Movement or other movements for which Mrs. Besant has at one or another of her periods worked, her services may seem to have been almost as much on one side as on the other. Nevertheless, in her own erratic way, this vivid and indefatigable woman has probably done more than any of those who sniff at her both for popular education in democracy and for the right of women to have a voice in every subject soever which touches their lives, and that of the community. To prove her inconsistent is as cheap a task as to prove the same of Mr. Gladstone. What is more interesting and valuable when we feel such people to be sincere, is to know how to themselves their inconsistencies came to be consistent. That feeling most of us have about Mrs. Besant: and that knowledge Mrs. Besant offers us in this book.

The Two Keys of Mrs. Besant’s Creeds

From Anglican *religieuse* to militant Materialist: from hard-and-fast Individualist to Socialist enthusiast: from Boards and Strikes to the transcendental “other-worldliness” of Theosophy: from protomartyr of Neo-Malthusianism to humble recanter of all for which she once sacrificed her feelings as a mother and as a woman—the record is certainly kaleidoscopic. Yet it is by no means incomprehensible, even on the face of it, to anyone who will bear in mind that while we can make our career we cannot make the circumstances we were born into. We have some say as to where we shall end; we have none as to where we must begin from, and therefore little as to points we must traverse on the way. Does it seem a far cry from the Anglican devotee and the parson’s wife to the Atheist lecturer and pamphleteer on the limitation

of families? On closer view, it may seem that, given the creed and the clergyman—she was *born* to them—given also Mrs. Besant's idealistic and rebellious nature, the Atheist and pamphleteer follow as naturally as possible. The creed and the clergyman, in fact, made them. But for that very reason they could not last, and were bound in turn to yield place to views which, while giving not less scope to the rebellious side of Mrs. Besant's nature, gave more to her idealism.

Rebellion—Idealism

These are the two notes. It is the latter which people overlook in the common sort of remark on the capture of Mrs. Besant by the Theosophists. "What an odd craze," people say, "for a woman of her clear-cut and logical mind." Clear-cut and logical, indeed! As a destructive critic, Mrs. Besant may be that and more. Newman was the same. But surely never was a nature less formed to maintain the attitude of unbelief. Have those who so speak of this lady ever read or heard her expositions of the Materialist creed? On that, as on every other subject, Mrs. Besant's style was facile, eloquent, throbbing with emotion and colour even to blurring-point. Under her hands, even cold negation must catch the glow of one who saw visions and dreamed dreams. If religion is "morality touched with emotion," far more so was Mrs. Besant's irreligion. The scene of the visions was moved from heaven to earth—the earth of the future: the setting, the properties, were changed, that was all. No medieval nun was ever readier to tumble before "a winking picture," let it but wink in the right way—that is, in some way remote from the bitter disillusionments which killed the religion of her youth, and, if possible, in a martyrdom as well as for faith. Throughout her life one traces the passionate eagerness to devote herself to something and someone under persecution. None can say of her, as his enemies say of Mr. Gladstone, that her inconsistencies came with the turn of the tide. Various as Mrs. Besant's phases have been, they have all had this in common: the espousal of something unpopular, something frowned on by principalities and powers, scoffed or screamed at by Society.

Personal Influences

Add to these influences those of persons, and the kaleidoscope clears still further. The Rev. Frank Besant, as priest and as husband, backed by Dr. Pusey and Mrs. Grundy, is a negative influence driving her from one point. In the nick of time appears Mr. Bradlaugh to draw her positively to the other. She cannot live on negation and *laissez faire*, and Mr. Herbert Burrows helps her to turn Socialist. Socialism has too much class-feeling and pigeon-hole about it, and she falls into the hands of Madame Blavatsky. We are far from the temerity of suggesting that Mrs. Besant will stay there—that this is positively the last of her religions. For those who voyage through many spiritual storms, the

haven of Absolute Authority waits at the other end; and the tangible, nay, osculable, Pope may yet, one would suspect, oust the invisible Mahatma. For the present the Quest of the Holy Grail—pathetically or ridiculously as you may choose to take it—seems to have ended not in the Host at St. Peter's, but in the Teacup of Simla. And up to this point, at least, we find nothing even in the most seemingly flagrant contradictions of Mrs. Besant's career to which the reading of her character here suggested does not supply a pretty intelligible key.

The Knowlton Pamphlet

For none of Mrs. Besant's beliefs has she suffered more persecution, and none has she more completely recanted in after days, than in the matter of the Knowlton Pamphlet and of her own writings on the same subject. Her former position she sums up with great clearness:—

Seeking to improve the physical type, scientific Materialism, it seemed to me, must forbid parentage to any but healthy married couples; it must restrict childbearing with the limits consistent with the thorough health and physical well-being of the mother; it must impose it as a duty never to bring children into the world unless the conditions for their fair nurture and development are present. Regarding it as hopeless, as well as mischievous, to preach asceticism, and looking on the conjunction of nominal celibacy with widespread prostitution as inevitable from the constitution of human nature, scientific Materialism—quite rationally and logically—advises deliberate restriction of the production of offspring, while sanctioning the exercise of the sexual instinct within the limits imposed by temperance, the highest physical and mental efficiency, the good order and dignity of society, and the self-respect of the individual. In all this there is nothing which for one moment implies approval of licentiousness, profligacy, unbridled self-indulgence. [239]

It is Theosophy which has changed Mrs. Besant's views on the subject, and led to the curious situation that while there are now many signs of their adoption by the sort of people who first denounced her diffusion of them, she herself has withdrawn from circulation, in sorrow and contrition, the pamphlet for which she once fought and conquered the law. Her explanation of the Theosophical objections to Neo-Malthusianism is somewhat transcendental; but at least the standpoint of the new religion is not that which roused her to passionate rebellion in some professors of the old, namely, the consecration of marital selfishness at the cost of wife, children, and the public health. Here again it is the forces, *rebellion* against oppression and suffering on the one hand, *idealism* which will accept even suffering as the price of the purification of human nature on the other, which seem to account for first one view and then the other in Mrs. Besant's mind. Take what

view we may of the question at issue, we must feel the heroic self-sacrifice of the woman who dared to step into the arena and face all that Mrs. Besant had to face in this cause, simply for the sake of the multitude of poor and struggling and ignorant woman between the devil and the deep sea, whom she describes (“especially wives of ministers of all denominations” [...]) as having written to her letters of pathetic thanks. For this, Mrs. Besant is surely worthy to stand beside Mrs. Josephine Butler, another woman who has faced shame for her sisters, the one for the oppressed prostitute, the other for the oppressed wife.

The Friendship with Mr. Bradlaugh

One of the most thoroughly satisfactory things in Mrs. Besant’s life has been the object lesson in friendship between men and women afforded by her relations with Mr. Bradlaugh, “the noblest friend that woman ever had” [...], as she here calls him. It was friendship which weathered many and various storms. It was, of course, fair game for the shafts of religious opponents who were conscientiously unable to conceive that Atheists could practise a sterner morality than average Christians. And later there was the strain of strong difference of conviction between the friends on religion and politics. Of the friendship which was proof against all this, and much more, this book gives a strangely fascinating picture. We read:—

He was the merriest of companions in our rare hours of relaxation; for many years he was wont to come to my house in the morning, after the hours always set aside by him for receiving poor men who wanted advice on legal and other matters—for he was a veritable poor man’s lawyer, always ready to help and counsel—and, bringing his books and papers, he would sit writing, hour after hour, I equally busy with my own work, now and then, perhaps, exchanging a word, breaking off just for lunch and dinner, and working on again in the evening till about ten o’clock—he always went early to bed when at home—he would take himself off again to his lodgings, about three-quarters of a mile away. Sometimes he would play cards for an hour, euchre being our favourite game. But while we were mostly busy and grave, he would make holiday sometimes, and then he was like a boy, brimming over with mirth, full of quaint turns of thought and speech; all the country round London has for me bright memories of our wanderings ... above all Broxbourne, where he delighted to spend the day with his fishing-rod.... He taught me all the mysteries of the craft.... How often he would voice his love of England, his admiration of her Parliament, his pride in her history! [178-79]

When Mrs. Besant’s husband took away the two children from the separated wife, the law deciding that an Atheist mother had no rights,

she broke down. Mr. Bradlaugh nursed his friend through the fever that followed:—

Through that terrible illness, day after day, Mr. Bradlaugh came to me, and sat writing beside me, feeding me with ice and milk, refused from all others, and behaving more like a tender mother than a man friend; he saved my life, though it seemed to me for awhile of little value, till the first months of lonely pain were over. [218]

Some good portraits of Mr. Bradlaugh are among the excellent illustrations of the book. To sum up our impressions, we may say that to anyone not wholly destitute of the gift of sympathetic insight, no matter how he may differ from Mrs. Besant in any or all of her departures, this autobiography must be deeply interesting as the reflection of a very rare, brave, and single-hearted personality.

- b. "Calcar," "Mrs. 'Annie' Besant's Apology," *Vanity Fair* (21 December 1893): 410

[The ironic tone of this review is evident from the outset. Not taking her on her own terms before critiquing her, the reviewer dismisses Besant because she has turned to the East. But in the first place this reviewer thinks he can reject her claims on the grounds that "probably no woman ever wrote really truthfully about herself." Satirically calling Besant "our heroine," the reviewer fails to acknowledge her awareness that she shared any fault in the disintegration of her marriage, engages in specious "logic," and directs an *ad hominem* attack against Blavatsky. This uncalled-for vituperation almost suggests personal animosity, or at the very least an egregious demonstration of misogyny. After showing no sympathy for any aspect of his subject's life experiences and belittling her at every turn, the reviewer cannot resist a final series of snide salvos by invoking *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and insulting the appearance of the executive committee of the matchgirls' union. The weekly *Vanity Fair* (1868-1924) was generally irreverent, especially through its full-page caricature portraits by "Spy" and "Ape," though it was still an establishment journal, directed toward an upper-class readership.]

So practised a writer as Mrs. Besant could hardly write a dull book if she tried, and her apology pro vitâ suâ is by no means uninteresting reading. Few educated readers, however, will take her quite so seriously as she takes herself, and the long extracts from *The National Reformer*, by means of which she "defines her position" at different periods, necessitate a good deal of skipping. The various "planks" in her different "platforms" are not matters of European importance, and there was really no need to describe them with such minuteness.

However, the chief inducement to write an autobiography is, no doubt, the delightful prospect of gossiping about oneself through four hundred pages, more or less, and it would be ungracious to grudge the autobiographer this satisfaction. Probably no woman ever wrote really truthfully about herself, and so we need not quite look on Mrs. Besant as the suffering innocent whose one thought was the good of others—the character in which she appears in these pages. At times she is plaintive about herself: she is a “child-wife” (at four-and-twenty and with two children); or the “Little Woman” of the giants of Free-thought. At others she is a heroine, “dealing merciless blows” at Christianity, which somehow has contrived to survive her assaults; or holding back with her single arm the fierce democracy in Palace Yard burning to avenge the chucking out of “our Charlie” from the House of Commons. To anybody who can read between the lines, she will appear as a warm-hearted wrong-headed woman who read a great deal too much in her youth and wrote and talked a great deal too much when she came to years of what may by courtesy be called discretion. All her geese (including herself) are swans of the most dazzling whiteness, while those of other people are the poorest creatures—hardly worthy indeed of the humble, but still honest, name of goose. Nobody who differs from her is influenced by any but the worst motives. Her husband is never mentioned without a sneer or a libel; the brutality and unfairness with which Sir George Jessel treated her earned for him a rebuke from no less a personage than a puisne¹ Judge of New South Wales—who, by the way, spoke of the Lord Chief Justice as “Lord” Cockburn. Mr. Justice North is a bigot of the sternest type; and as for Lord Halsbury, he endeavoured by a score of deliberate lies wickedly and maliciously to secure an unjust verdict against her.

Our heroine began life as a Christian of the most exalted and sentimental type. She fell in love with the Heavenly Bridegroom; she yearned and brooded and panted; she fasted according to the ordinances of the Church, and occasionally went so far as to flagellate herself to see how she could bear pain in case she should ever be called on to win the crown of martyrdom. But marriage came, and children, and alas! bronchitis in the nursery. The sight of the sufferings of the poor little wretch was too much for her faith, and in the agony of her baby she saw the finger of the Person she had worshipped. She quarrelled bitterly with her husband, renounced her Creator (whom, with a special anthropomorphism, she seems to have now regarded as an omnipotent Rev. Frank Besant) and executed a deed of separation, to which both Mr. Besant and the Almighty were parties. For seventeen years she strove as a militant and uncompromising Atheist and Materialist with, it must be confessed, the greatest courage and constancy. She preached that nothing that could not be proved to her very imperfect reasoning faculties was to be believed in, and that it was not only ridiculous but criminal to

1 puisne: A legal adjective that denotes a superior court judge, who would be inferior in rank to a chief justice.

worship that which, so far as she could see, did not exist. But as the soul of Woman must worship something, she made for herself a sort of shabby god, which she called Humanity, and worshipped that. And one day she met a fat old woman, whose exquisitely-moulded fingers rolled cigarettes continually. She felt a well-nigh uncontrollable desire to bend down and kiss her; but, with a flash of the old unbending pride (Mrs. Besant is very proud of her pride), she made some inanely courteous remark and turned away. But her pride was soon conquered. She read the Report of the Psychical Society, which, on the evidence of accomplices, proved Madame Blavatsky an impostor, and she laughed aloud at the absurdity of supposing that a woman with such fearless blue eyes could stoop to a falsehood. And next day she joined the Theosophists. The towering intellect, which had forced her to disbelieve in God because there are a few discrepancies in the Four Gospels, broke down, and she found salvation at the feet of a Sibyl of whose oracles this is an unusually intelligible specimen: "In order to become the Knower of All Self thou hast first of all self to be the knower. To reach the knowledge of that self thou hast to give up Self to non-self, and then thou canst repose between the wings of the Great Bird."

And so Titania, a rebel to her lord, fell in love with an ass's head. The book is adorned by many photographs of the author and of her friends, including the Strike Committee of the Matchmakers' Union; which add to its interest, if not exactly to its artistic charm.

c. Unsigned review, "Annie Besant," *Pall Mall Gazette* (23 December 1893): 4

[Although once again noting Besant's sincerity and commitment, this review is a prime example of damning with faint praise. Apparently this reviewer's prejudice against Theosophy makes it impossible for him or her to recognize and acknowledge the sense of peace that Besant has achieved. The tone of the review stands in sharp contrast to the genuine respect for Besant as a "remarkable woman" that came from the pen of Stead two years earlier in his *Review of Reviews* (see Appendix A), the periodical he founded after his long service at the *Pall Mall Gazette* that ended in 1890. Founded in 1865 by George Murray Smith, the daily PMG would celebrate its ten thousandth number in 1897; this review appeared under the general editorship of Sir Edward Tyas Cook in the year that the newspaper inaugurated the *Pall Mall Magazine* (1893-1914), known for its publishing of fiction.]

It is difficult to read an autobiography without irritation, for we are easily offended by the egotism of others, and here we must meet with egotism in its most concentrated form. Nevertheless, we do not hesitate to say that Mrs. Besant's book is the history of a very remarkable woman, and that we followed her career with deep interest, not unmixed with respect and admiration, until its unfortunate close amidst Theosophy. Her early

marriage at nineteen with a clergyman of the Church of England proved an unhappy one, and this step ushered in a change from what she describes as a happy and peaceful girlhood into a very troubled life. She is evidently a woman of ardent nature, of strong intellect, and of untiring energy and devotion. Her loss of early faith drove her first into a profession of Atheism. She devoted many years of journalism and platform work to the propagation of secularist doctrines, and, first as a contributor and then as co-editor, was for long closely connected with the *National Reformer*. Under the influence of Mr. Hyndman and the founders of the Fabian Society, she subsequently adopted Socialism as an ideal and as an economic policy, and spent much of her energies in furthering the Labour cause. Last of all—and this seems to us the most deplorable part of Mrs. Besant's career—she threw herself into the arms of the lady known as Mdme. Blavatsky and became a Theosophist. Here we must leave her at the present moment. The last chapter of her history is still to be written, and we trust that it may end in a more satisfactory fashion. Throughout her entire life one central figure has been associated with all its storm and conflict, and also with its achievements. It is that of the friend whom she idolized, Charles Bradlaugh, sometime member for Northampton. It is difficult for us to realize in these days of comparative toleration how great was the resistance to all the causes with which this pair identified themselves. The land question, trades unions, the obstructive power of the House of Lords, the Irish Coercion Bill, the incidence of taxation, the distribution of wealth—on these and on many other such burning questions they were found always in opposition to the Government of the day. They were feared and hated by society, distrusted even by those who were not without sympathy for their political views. The workmen of this country owe much to Charles Bradlaugh; but it was to the Charles Bradlaugh of early days rather than to the man who, wearied of strife and persecution, contented himself towards the end of his career with passing second-rate compromise bills through the House of Commons. Their joint action in the publication of the Knowlton pamphlet brought on them both a storm of obloquy, though by the calmer light of to-day we can see them as the Lord Chief Justice described them, "Two enthusiasts, who have been actuated by a desire to do good in a particular department of society."

Mrs. Besant's education was a wide one. When she was already in the midst of active life she qualified herself as teacher in eight different sciences, and, with Dr. Aveling's assistance, kept classes going for some years under the Science and Art Department at South Kensington. She possesses very unusual gifts of speech, and lectured all over England for many years on Labour and Socialist themes. Her account of the occasion on which she first became aware of this power is a dramatic one. She says: "I delivered my first lecture, but delivered it to rows of empty benches in Sibsey Church. A queer whim took me that I would like to know how 'it felt' to preach, and vague fancies stirred in me that I could speak if I had the chance. So, locked alone in the great silent church,

whither I had gone to practise some organ exercises, I delivered my first lecture on the inspiration of the Bible" [115-16].

She has, throughout her life, constantly been engaged in writing pamphlets and articles, in editing newspapers, and in crusades against injustice, real or supposed. She has exposed workhouse scandals, formed vigilance committees over cases of cruelty to children, sweating, and unsanitary workshops; and one great fight which she undertook on behalf of the London match girls resulted in the removal of their grievances. In addition to this she was recently elected a member of the School Board; and, if this picture of incessant and strenuous effort does not compel our entire sympathies, we feel that that may perhaps be because her personality has failed to fascinate us. No one, however divergent his own beliefs and opinions may be, can doubt Mrs. Besant's absolute sincerity, or refuse to admit that she has never shrunk from intervening, at whatever cost to herself, in any conflict where she could strike a blow for the cause of the weak and the oppressed.

The book which bears her name is one which deals with a deeply significant page in English politics, and on that ground, as well as because of its personal interest, we can recommend it to the attention of her contemporaries.

- d. Unsigned review, "Recent Biography," *The Athenaeum* 103.3458 (3 February 1894): 28

[Sadly, the *Athenaeum* did not review *An Autobiography* in a balanced manner or at much length. Employing a mocking tone throughout, the reviewer faults the author for the sin of vanity, takes out of context the opening sentence of her preface, and dismisses her "rash" six-year-old conversion to Theosophy as merely her "latest enthusiasm." One of the mainstay literary journals and an example of "higher" journalism, the weekly *Athenaeum* (1828-1921) came to be especially valued for its art criticism. For further reading, see Jeanne Fahnestock, "Authors of Book Reviews in the *Athenaeum*, 1830-1900: A Preview and a Sample," *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* no. 15 (March 1972): 47-52, as well as Leslie Marchand, *The Athenaeum: A Mirror of Victorian Culture* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1941).]

Annie Besant: An Autobiography (Fisher Unwin) is a book which does not call for lengthy notice in these columns, though it has a certain importance as a "human document," and is likely to be regarded by some as a sort of new gospel. Mrs. Besant admits that there is "a savour of vanity" in the task she has undertaken [5], and the vanity is conspicuous on every page, from the first, in which she is careful to inform us that her "baby eyes opened to the light" at 5.39 p.m. on October 1st, 1847 [11], down to the last, in which we are assured that, as one of "those on whose heads the touch of the Master has rested in bless-

ing," she "can never again look upon the world save through eyes made luminous with the radiance of the Eternal Peace" [364]. To members of the Blavatsky Lodge of the Theosophical Society, the leadership of which has devolved on her since Madame Blavatsky's death, it is, of course, satisfactory to know that even in infancy Mrs. Besant was "mystical and imaginative, religious to the very finger-tips, and with a certain faculty for seeing visions and dreaming dreams" [24-25], and that every step in her life, through the forty years and more which passed before she was herself aware of her reincarnation, was a predestined movement towards the happy day in which her eyes were to be made luminous and radiant, and by a "flash of illumination" she was to know "that the weary search was over and the very Truth was found" [340]. It was to Mr. W.T. Stead that she owed this flash. One day he handed her Madame Blavatsky's volumes on "The Secret Doctrine." "Can you review these?" he asked. "My young men all fight shy of them, but you are quite mad enough on these subjects to make something of them." It is true that a fortnight before, as she says, "I heard a Voice that was to become to me the holiest sound on earth." But the Voice was unintelligible until "The Secret Doctrine" had been read. That done, Mrs. Besant straightway became a Theosophist, and, sitting for about two years at Madame Blavatsky's feet as a disciple, was able to succeed to her apostleship. She now sees that she was a Theosophist in spite of herself and her ignorance all through her dreamy childhood and girlish aspirations to become a nun, her marriage, her association with Mr. Bradlaugh in the preaching of Atheism, and her association with the Fabian Society in the preaching of Socialism; and in furnishing a minute account of so much of her life as she thinks the world needs to know she endeavours to make it plain that all her past experiences and occupations were preparatory to the final stage of mental and moral development which she has at length reached, and on which she stands as on a rock. But as she is still only forty-six years old, with the addition of a few months, days, and minutes, and may, therefore, hope to live for another quarter of a century or so, affording material for at least one other volume of autobiography, and time for several other religious changes, she is, perhaps, rather rash in speaking so positively of her latest enthusiasm.

4. Review essay by W.E. Gladstone, Annie Besant's reply, and letter from Gladstone to Digby Besant

[Repeatedly thrust into the political spotlight as Prime Minister of Great Britain, William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98) was also highly regarded as a Christian statesman. Recently retired from the last of his four terms as prime minister, he was not an unlikely candidate to take on a religious debate with Besant. Not surprisingly, however, he doesn't recall his 1876 letter of thanks to her for sending him her pamphlet, *Why Did Gladstone Fall from Power?* (see introduction to the last

item in this appendix). For a well-balanced overview of Gladstone's life and accomplishments, see David W. Bebbington, *William Ewart Gladstone: Faith and Politics in Victorian Britain* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1993). The monthly *Nineteenth Century*, founded in 1877, has been described by Christopher A. Kent as "a general journal of controversy for 'middlebrow' readers"; see "Victorian Periodicals and the Constructing of Victorian Reality," *Victorian Periodicals*, vol. 2, ed. J. Don Vann and Rosemary T. VanArsdel (New York: Modern Language Association, 1989): 1-12.]

- a. From Gladstone, "True and False Conceptions of the Atonement," *The Nineteenth Century* 211 (September 1894): 317-33

[Interestingly enough, Gladstone does not apply his attribute "loathsome" to either Besant's Theosophy or her Atheism, but rather to what she endorsed in the past, namely, birth control. He willingly acknowledges her multiple lives from her self-description, but he begins to take potshots at her when he refers to her "spiritual itinerary." Somehow her struggles with doubt go unnoticed, and he denies her basic religiosity as he focuses on his hope that she will one day return to Christianity. (Of course, he could not know about her future interest in and publications about Esoteric Christianity.) Reading Gladstone's overview of Besant's life is a valuable experience because it provides a good example of summary with a purpose. Sincerity may be labeled a virtue, but self-confidence is a failing, especially in a woman. By the time that he cites her "rash and blameworthy ignorance," we can understand that it was no wonder Digby objected to his mother's treatment by Gladstone (see the final entry in this appendix). Despite recognizing the benefit of confronting opposition ("the enemy," including the enemy within), Gladstone ultimately treats Besant as if she belongs to a separate sphere of thinking. Here he writes in his self-assumed role of Protector of Christianity, needless to say not viewing his own zeal as excessive. Hardly a review, this article primarily provides an occasion for him to explicate the Atonement at considerable length, acting very much the theologian himself.]

PREFATORY. This volume [*Annie Besant: An Autobiography*] presents to us an object of considerable interest. It inspires sympathy with the writer, not only as a person highly gifted, but as a seeker after truth, although it is to be regretted that at a particular point of the narrative the discussion borders on loathsome. Indeed, it becomes hard to conceive by what mental process Mrs. Besant can have convinced herself, that it was part of her mission as a woman to open such a subject as that of the Ninth Chapter [The Knowlton Pamphlet], in the face of the world, and in a book meant for popular perusal. Instruction will be derived from the work at large; but probably not exactly the instruction intended by the authoress. Her readers will find that they are

expected to feel a lively interest in her personality: and, in order that this interest may not be disappointed, they will find her presented to their view in no less than three portraiture, at different portions of the volume. They will also find, that the book is a spiritual itinerary, and that it shows with how much at least of intellectual ease, and what unquestioning assumptions of being right, vast spaces of mental travelling may be performed. The stages are, indeed, glaringly in contrast with one another; yet their violent contrarieties do not seem at any period to suggest to the writer so much as a doubt whether the mind, which so continually changes in attitude and colour, can after all be very trustworthy in each and all its movements. This uncomfortable suggestion is never permitted to intrude; and the absolute self-complacency of the authoress bears her on through tracts of air buoyant and copious enough to carry on the Dircaean swan. Mrs. Besant passes from her earliest to her latest stage of thought as lightly as the swallow skims the surface of the lawn, and with just as little effort to ascertain what lies beneath it. An ordinary mind would suppose that modesty was the one lesson which she could not have failed to learn from her extraordinary permutations; but the chemist, who shall analyse by percentages the contents of these pages, will not, I apprehend, be in a condition to report that of such an element he can find even the infinitesimal quantity usually and conveniently denominated a "trace." Her several schemes of belief, or non-belief, appear to have been entertained one after another, with the same undoubting confidence, until the junctures successively arrived for their not regretful, but rather contemptuous rejection. They are nowhere based upon reasoning, but they rest upon one and the same authority—the authority of Mrs. Besant. In the general absence of argument to explain the causes of her movements, she apparently thinks it sufficient to supply us with her three portraits, as carrying with them sufficient attestation. If we ask upon which of her religions, or substitutes for religion, we are to place reliance, the reply would undoubtedly be, upon the last. Yes; but who is to assure us that it will be the last? It remains open to us to hope, for her own sake, that she may yet describe the complete circle, and end somewhere near the point where she began.

Religion had a large share in the interests of Mrs. Besant's early childhood; and at eight years (45) old she received a strongly Evangelical bent. She is sensible of having been much governed by vanity at this period of her life, while she does not inform us whether this quality spontaneously disappeared, or what had become of it in the later stages. It can hardly be made matter of reproach to Mrs. Besant that such early years did not supply her with her final standing-ground; or that, like most of the other highly gifted pupils in the school popularly known as Evangelical, she felt herself irresistibly impelled to an onward movement. She came to rejoice, as so many more have done, in the great conception of a Catholic Church lasting through the centuries (56); "the hidden life grew stronger," and the practice of weekly communion,

may, even that of self-chastisement, was adopted. In retrospect, she perceives that the keynote of her life has been a “longing for sacrifice to something felt as greater than the self” (57). When she married, at the age of twenty, she “had no more idea of the marriage relation than if she had been four years old.” The supremacy of the new form given to her religious ideas is not very well defined, nor is there any intelligible account of the process through which it was summarily put upon its trial. She informs us, indeed, that she went up to the sources, and made herself acquainted with the Fathers of the Christian Church. It would be interesting to know what were her opportunities, or what was the extent of the girl’s patristic reading (56). Suffice it to say that it has not left the smallest trace upon the matter or spirit of this volume. And, indeed, that a reader of the early Fathers should present to us, as agreeable to the teaching “of the Churches,” that utterly modern caricature of the doctrine of the Atonement which will presently be cited, is a solecism which, along with a multitude of other solecisms, we must leave it to her readers to examine. As for Mrs. Besant she is frankly astonished at the amount of her own religiosity, and she accepts with apparent acquiescence the remark of her dying father [sic], that “darling Annie’s only fault was being too religious” (24). In all her different phases of thought, that place in the mind where the sense of sin should be, appears to have remained, all through the shifting scenes of her mental history, an absolute blank. Without this sense, it is obvious that her Evangelicalism and her High Churchism were alike built upon the sand, and that in strictness she never quitted what she had never in its integrity possessed. Speaking generally, it may be held that she has followed at all times her own impulses with an entire sincerity; but that those impulses have been woefully dislocated in origin, spirit, and direction, by an amount of egregious self-confidence which is in itself a guarantee of failure in mental investigations.

After a physical crisis, brought about by the sufferings of a child in illness, her religion received a shock which it had not strength to survive. She resolved carefully and thoroughly to examine its dogmas one by one (99); and she addressed herself, by a process which she does not describe, to four propositions, which, as she states, are assailed by “the steadily advancing waves of historical and scientific criticism.” The propositions are:

1. The eternity of punishment after death.
2. The meaning of goodness and love, as applied to a God who had made this world with all its sin and misery.
3. *The nature of the Atonement of Christ, and the justice of God in accepting a vicarious suffering from Christ, and a vicarious righteousness from the sinner.*
4. The meaning of inspiration as applied to the Bible, and the reconciliation of the perfections of the Author [i.e., God] with the blunders and immoralities of the work.

These propositions were rejected by the young lady not long out of her teens. But lest we should resent her reticence as to the method in which she fulfilled her plan of systematic examination, she gives us this assurance: "Looking back I cannot but see how orderly was the progression of thought, how steady the growth, after that first terrible earthquake."

Still, beyond this authoritative notice, we have not the smallest tittle of evidence to show either, first, that any of the propositions were ever subjected to any serious examination at all, or even, secondly, that any pains were taken to verify them as propositions really incorporated in that teaching of "the Churches" with which she was resolved to deal. It is hardly needful to observe that, to allege such incorporation, with respect to an essential part of the third proposition, is to exhibit what, in a case where insincerity is not for the moment to be imputed, can only be described as rash and blameworthy ignorance.

It is not necessary to follow the authoress into her further experiences as (in her own language) an atheist and a theosophist. The point at which she parts company from Christianity is the point for taking up her challenge. Accordingly, the purpose of these pages is to test at least one of her four propositions, that which relates to the doctrine of Atonement. But as I am conscious of no title to set off an *ipse dixit* against the *ipsa dixit* of Mrs. Besant, the task set before me can only be performed by a patient examination of language and of reasoning, which supply the sole means ordinarily vouchsafed to man as his aids in the search for truth. In speaking thus, I waive no tittle of the authority which belongs to the established doctrine of the Atonement; but only abstain from modes of speech and argument, which could find no possible access to the minds of such as follow the methods adopted by the writer of this autobiography. (317-20)

* * *

In conclusion.

It is not difficult to perceive that works and proceedings such as those of Mrs. Besant may be useful to religion, not by virtue of what they intend, but by virtue of the controlling Providence which shapes their direction and effect, in total independence of the aims of their authors. Of the four propositions of Mrs. Besant, one, standing second in order, deals with the problem presented to us by the existence of evil in the world created and ruled by an all-powerful as well as all-holy God. This problem appertains to theism at large, and not to the special dispensation of the Gospel. The other three, touching upon the eternity of future punishment, the inspiration of Holy Scripture, and the atonement of Christ, lead us upon ground properly Christian. I suppose it cannot be denied that upon each and all of these doctrines rash things have been said, with the intention of defending them, but with a great lack of wisdom in the choice of means for making that

defence effectual. The enemy, prowling round the fortress, may be of the highest utility in awakening the care and vigilance of those to whom its safety is entrusted. In making use, however, of this illustration, we have to recollect that this care and vigilance are to be employed not only against the foe outside the walls, but against ourselves. The heat of controversy, the intermittent negligence of the human understanding in the performance of its work, and the aptitude of selfish passions to clothe themselves in the garb of zeal for religion, are among the causes which may require the exercise of careful and constant criticism over the forms of language which Christian doctrine has to be inculcated, and the application of a corrective and pruning process to retrench excesses unwittingly committed by believers; as well as to supply those voids in the assertion of doctrine which result from the wasting, sapping, and gnawing operation of actual heresy. The promise of perpetuity and immortality to the Church, against which the gates of hell are not to prevail, is a promise to the Church at large, and not to its individual members, or even to its particular sections. It will surely not be denied by any person of candid mind that these possibilities of excess through the narrowness and temerity of unbalanced zeal are more than merely abstract possibilities. They have been painfully illustrated in practice. We have been told at times of the indiscriminating grace of God, which saves or consigns to damnation according to mere choice or pleasure, and irrespectively of anything in the persons whose destinies are to be so controlled; so that of two persons, exactly alike in point of service or offence, one is to be rescued and the other lost. The meaning of this would be that the sovereign pleasure of God did not move upon lines parallel to those of the moral law. Let those, who are so inclined, be responsible for the consequences of such a doctrine. That the apprehension of it is not unreal, may be readily perceived by those who will refer to the Lambeth Articles of 1595, passed by Whitgift and certain of the Elizabethan Bishops, but never incorporated in the authoritative documents of the English Church. As against them and all such utterances we rear the standard of Scripture: "Are not my ways equal? are not your ways unequal?" (Ezekiel xviii.25). And we welcome aid, from Mrs. Besant or anyone else, which recalls us from rashness to vigilance and care. Again, and in closer proximity to the present subject, we have seen that even now representations are sometimes made which seem to treat the Atonement of Christ not as a guarantee, but rather as a substitute for holiness. For if sin, which is undoubtedly a debt, be nothing but a debt, if it be so detached from the person of the debtor that when it is paid it matters not by whom, that then the debtor can no more be challenged, and remains as he was before in all things except that a burden has been discharged from his shoulders, then again the moral laws are in danger. For those laws will not for a moment tolerate that grace and favour be disjoined from reformation, justification from repentance and conversion of the heart.

Such are the openings for error, which are due to the shortcomings of individuals, or of factions in the Church. It is needless to write upon the deeper question, whether the Christian Church at large is wholly exempt from the possibility of going astray in matters not vital to the Christian faith; whether the promise of perpetual life is equivalent to a promise of perpetual and perfect health. It can hardly be said that this question is disposed of by the terms of the promise itself, for life does not of itself exclude languor and disease. Another parallel may be drawn, which is perhaps not wholly fanciful. The Christian Church has the promise and the note of sanctity, no less than of truth. And yet this promise of an indestructible holiness and striving after the image of God does not exclude vast masses of sin from her precincts. Why should imperfections in belief be less compatible with the human conditions of the Christian dispensation than imperfections in practice, provided they are subject to the same limiting provision—this namely, that they do not touch the central seat of life, do not destroy, though they may impair, the action of the Church in the fulfilment of its office? We know that the tares are mingled with the wheat, and how can we be certain that those tares may not signify perverted thought as well as corrupted action? But I desist from this strain of observation, and bring these remarks to a close with the suggestion that, according to the established doctrine of the Holy Scripture and of the Christian Church, the great Sacrifice of Calvary does not undermine or enfeeble, but illuminates and sustains, the moral law; and that the third proposition of Mrs. Besant, with which alone we are here concerned, is naught. (329-31)

- b. From Annie Besant's reply, *The Nineteenth Century* 37 (June 1895): 1021-26

[Here Besant seizes an opportunity to turn the occasion of Gladstone's ostensible review into an exchange of views with him in the prominent pages of the *Nineteenth Century*. This is a chance, too, for her to link herself with four-time Prime Minister Gladstone in the year following his final term. She throws back in his face his attack on her changeability and then switches from a debate mode to her own explication of atonement for which no official grounds of conduct need apply; essentially, by recasting the topic as an ordinary language discussion she frees herself from staying within the confines of a single religious ideology. (For more on Besant and the Atonement, see *Autobiographical Sketches*, where the subject is first introduced in Section II.) Incidentally, there is no indication that she was aware of Gladstone's reply to her son Digby's taking him to task, reproduced at the end of this appendix.]

Mr. Gladstone's very interesting article under the above title in this Review for September last, did not meet my eyes till some months later, and even then I had not the means of answering it, having neither a copy of my biography nor of my early essay on the atonement within

my reach. This must be my apology for my belated answer; but the questions raised are so important, and the inner truth hidden under the ecclesiastical dogma of the atonement is of such perennial interest, that I take advantage of the unwritten law which gives to an assailed person the right of reply in the periodical that assailed him, less to defend myself than to submit to the thoughtful public a “conception of atonement” that may, to some, prove suggestive and helpful.

I may dismiss in a few lines the personal *badinage* with which Mr. Gladstone fills his first pages. I do not care to retort in a similar fashion, curiously easy as the task would be, did I wish to hurl *tu quoques* at the venerable statesman. It is enough to say that intellectual growth must imply intellectual change of view, and that the change will occur in the field in which the intellectual energy is exerted; thus we see Mr. Gladstone clinging in his age to the theology of his boyhood, but in the sphere of politics, where his intellect has spent its strength, how vast and numerous his changes. Changes are a sign of weakness only when a person sways backwards and forwards in opinion, without new evidence being available; to remain doggedly fixed in immature opinions against new and cogent evidence is rather a sign of intellectual obtuseness and obstinacy than of strength.

I am a little puzzled with Mr. Gladstone’s statement that there is no evidence that the propositions he quotes were subjected to any serious examination, or any pains taken to verify them as found in the teachings of the Churches; and with his phrase, “the *ipsa dixit* of Mrs. Besant.” For it is equally difficult to believe that he made this grave accusation, lending to it the weight of his great name, without referring to any writing of mine on the atonement, or that, having so referred, he could have penned so misleading a statement. Leaving this as unintelligible, I content myself with quoting two brief passages, from an essay [her *On the Atonement* (1874)] in which the growth of the doctrine in the Church was traced from the patristic conception—in which the death of Christ was a sacrifice made to Satan, that no injustice might be done even to the devil, in wresting man from him—down to the crystallisation of the medieval conception in Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*. (1021-22)

★ ★ ★

... Instead of analysing Mr. Gladstone’s twelve statements one by one, I prefer to put over against them a different “conception of the atonement,” and leave the reader to judge whether of the twain appeals most to his intuition and his reason.

I need not here argue the question of the Divine Existence, whence is our world; for Mr. Gladstone as Christian, and I as Theosophist, can agree that our world and our universe result from the Will and Thought of the Logos, who was and is “God.” (1023)

★ ★ ★

If the vicarious atonement be made into a merely historical event, be regarded as unique, and be isolated from the general law of the world, its defenders are compelled to guard it by forensic weapons, and these wound the truth that is defended more than they drive back its assailants. Here, as elsewhere, “the letter killeth.” But if the Law of Sacrifice be seen as the necessary condition of the manifesting Logos; if it be seen as the law of progress; if it be seen as that by which man ultimately becomes united to the Divine Nature; then vicarious sacrifice becomes the foundation-stone of the world, and in all its forms it is recognised as essentially one and the same truth. We shall understand why it appears in great religions, and shall be able to separate the essential truth from the allegories that often garb it, and the ignorant distortions that conceal. All sacrifices made for love’s sake are seen as spiritually flowing from the supreme Act of Sacrifice, as minor manifestations of the Divine Love in man, as reflections of that cross which Plato—holding the ancient doctrine here set forth—spoke of as drawn by Deity on the universe.

Besides, this conception of vicarious sacrifice—of atonement, if atonement means not a propitiatory offering, but a uniting of man with God—leaves no room for the undermining of moral laws in the minds of men: a danger from which the historical and forensic conception will never be free. That law is inviolable in all regions of consciousness, as inexorable in the mental and moral as in the physical world; that a wrong consciously done must result in injury to the moral nature; that an evil habit formed can only be slowly unwrought by painful effort; that the cruellest thing that could happen to us would be if disharmony with the Divine Nature, expressed in the laws of the spiritual, mental, and physical worlds *could* bring aught but pain—all this needs constant enforcement if man is to grow upwards, to become the Christ in strength not in weakness, triumphant and not crucified.

Thus have I learned from the teachings of the Divine Wisdom, from the Theosophy which is the core of every spiritual religion. (1025-26)

c. Letter from Gladstone to Digby Besant (4 October 1894)

[In an appendix to his family history, *The Besant Pedigree* (London: Besant & Company, 1930), Arthur Digby Besant prints the following letter, introducing it with these prefatory remarks: “[W]ritten a few months after his final retirement from political life, [this letter from Gladstone] was sent in reply to a letter which, as an impetuous young man, I had ventured to address to him protesting against some of the views he had expressed in an article reviewing my mother’s Autobiography and published in *The Nineteenth Century*. Considering the relative ages and positions of the writer and the recipient, the letter is a wonderful example of courtesy and dignity” (271). Digby also prints an earlier letter from Gladstone to his mother (25 November 1876), written sometime after his defeat by Disraeli and in appreciation of her pamphlet, “Why Did Gladstone Fall from Power.” This letter con-

cludes as follows: "It is not my custom, for it is not in my power, to acknowledge so particularly tracts on public or other affairs which I may receive, even if they convey as pointed an appeal; but I beg you, Madam, to accept this note as a willing tribute to the ability and force, as well as the integrity and sense of justice, with which you have discussed a question of vital interest" (270).]

Hawarden Castle,
Chester,
October 4, 1894

Dear Sir,

I thank you sincerely for the singular gentleness with which you treat me in your very kind and also very touching letter.

It scarcely admits of argument from my side—for who would argue with a profoundly affectionate son to prove to him (and I cannot prove, for I have only such conjectural knowledge as the book supplies) that his mother was not exempt from the general law of human kind, and consequently had imperfections?

At an earlier period I should have been happy to make Mrs. Besant's acquaintance: but my age and the condition of more senses than one are now great impediments to the extension of my circle.

One word of explanation on my article, only to say that what it imputes to the book is what I have known in actual life as attaching to estimable, excellent, perhaps even illustrious characters.

I remain dear Sir,
With sincere appreciation,
Your very faithful
W.E. Gladstone

Appendix C: Contemporary Issues

1. Charles Knowlton, "Philosophical Proem," *The Fruits of Philosophy: An Essay on the Population Question* (1832; rev. ed. London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1877)

[Knowlton's original subtitle was "The Private Companion of Young Married People," and he first published the book anonymously, simply attributing its authorship to "a Physician." Although granting the importance of Knowlton's early attempt at providing an objective, scientific description of birth control techniques, both Besant and Bradlaugh had reservations about his work, as she observes in *Autobiographical Sketches*, prompting her publication of *The Law of Population* by her own publishing firm later in 1877 (see Appendix D). Knowlton's preface might well strike present-day readers as somewhat bizarre, and later on, in the body of his main text, it's hard to know where he is headed with his human/animal comparisons. His formal language and roundabout manner of addressing sexual pleasure finally devolve into a plea for self-control, for which we might read "abstinence" today. For Knowlton, the question of temperance versus intemperance is relative or subjective—in short, what he would call an "individual" matter—but since conventional morality still obtains, his language is euphemistic and increasingly convoluted because he is trying so hard not to offend. However, in the process of appealing to his readership to act for the greater good of the community, Knowlton's argument becomes tautological and more obfuscating than anything else. By his final paragraph he more or less stops beating around the bush and gets down to his main point, namely, that it is the physician's moral duty to provide information about contraception to the public to avoid the "evil" that overpopulation implies, especially given that mankind needs a counter to "cold asceticism."]

Consciousness is not a "principle" or substance of any kind; nor is it, strictly speaking, a property of any substance or being. It is a peculiar action of the nervous system; and the nervous system is said to be sensible, or to possess the property of sensibility, because those sentient actions which constitute our different consciousnesses may be excited in it. The nervous system includes not only the brain and spinal marrow, but numerous soft white cords, called nerves, which extend from the brain and spinal marrow to every part of the body in which a sensation can be excited.

A sensation is a sentient action of a nerve and the brain; a thought or idea (both the same thing) is a sentient action of the brain alone. A sensation, or a thought, is consciousness, and there is no consciousness but that which consists either in a sensation or a thought.

Agreeable consciousness constitutes what we call happiness, and

disagreeable consciousness constitutes misery. As sensations are a higher degree of consciousness than mere thoughts, it follows, that agreeable sensations constitute a more exquisite happiness than agreeable thoughts. That portion of happiness which consists in agreeable sensations is commonly called *pleasure*. No thoughts are agreeable except those which were originally excited by, or have been associated with, agreeable sensations. Hence if a person never had experienced any agreeable sensations, he could have no agreeable thoughts; and would of course be an entire stranger to happiness.

There are five species of sensation, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling. There are many varieties of feeling—as the feeling of hunger, thirst, cold, hardness, &c. Many of these feelings are excited by agents that act upon the exterior of the body, such as solid substances of every kind, heat, and various chemical irritants. Other feelings owe their existence to states or conditions of internal organs. These latter feelings are called *passions*.

Those passions which owe their existence chiefly to the state of the brain, or to causes acting directly upon the brain, are called the moral passions. They are grief, anger, love, &c. They consist of sentient actions which commence in the brain and extend to the nerves in the region of the stomach, heart, &c. But when the cause of the internal feeling or passion is seated in some organ remote from the brain, as in the stomach, the genital organs, &c., the sentient action which constitutes the passion, commences in the nerves of such organ, and extends to the brain; and the passion is called an *appetite*, *instinct*, or *desire*. Some of these passions are natural, as hunger, thirst, the reproductive instinct, the desire to urinate, &c. Others are gradually acquired by habit. A *hankering* for stimulants, as spirits, opium and tobacco, is one of these.

Such is the nature of things that our most vivid and agreeable sensations cannot be excited under all circumstances, nor beyond a certain extent under any circumstances, without giving rise, in one way or another, to an amount of disagreeable consciousness, or misery, exceeding the amount of agreeable consciousness, which attend such ill-timed or excessive gratification. To excite agreeable sensations to a degree not exceeding this certain extent, is temperance; to excite them beyond this extent, is intemperance; not to excite them at all is mortification or abstinence. This certain extent varies with different individuals, according to their several circumstances, so that what would be temperance in one person may be intemperance in another.

To be free from disagreeable consciousness, is to be in a state which compared with a state of misery, is a happy state; yet absolute happiness does not consist in the absence of misery—if it do, rocks are happy. It consists, as aforesaid, in agreeable consciousness. That which enables a person to excite or maintain agreeable consciousness, is not happiness; but the *idea* of having such in one's possession is agreeable, and of course is a portion of happiness. Health and wealth go far in enabling a person to excite and maintain agreeable consciousness.

That which gives rise to agreeable consciousness is *good*, and we desire it. If we use it intemperately, such use is bad, but the thing itself is still good. Those acts (and intentions are acts of that part of man which intends) of human beings which tend to the promotion of happiness are good; but they are also called *virtuous*, to distinguish them from other things of the same tendency. There is nothing for the word *virtue* to signify but virtuous actions. Sin signifies nothing by sinful actions: and sinful, wicked, vicious, or bad actions, are those which are productive of more misery than happiness.

When an individual gratifies any of his instincts in a *temperate* degree, he adds an item to the sum total of human happiness, and causes the amount of human happiness to exceed the amount of misery, farther than if he had not enjoyed himself, therefore it is virtuous, or, to say the least, it is not vicious or sinful for him so to do. But it must ever be remembered, that this temperate degree depends on circumstances—that one person's health, pecuniary circumstances, or social relations may be such that it would cause more misery than happiness for him to do an act which, being done by a person under different circumstances, would cause more happiness than misery. Therefore it would be right for the latter to perform such act, but not for the former.

Again. Owing to his *ignorance*, a man may not be able to gratify a desire without causing misery (wherefore it would be wrong for him to do it), but with knowledge of means to prevent this misery, he may so gratify it that more pleasure than pain will be the result of the act, in which case the act to say the least is justifiable. Now, therefore, it is virtuous, nay, it is the *duty* for him who has a knowledge of such means, to convey it to those who have it not; for by so doing, he furthers the cause of human happiness.

Man by nature is endowed with the talent of devising means to remedy or prevent the evils that are liable to arise from gratifying our appetites; and it is as much the duty of the physician to inform mankind of the means of preventing the evils that are liable to arise from gratifying the reproductive instinct, as it is to inform them how to keep clear of the gout or the dyspepsia. Let not the cold ascetic say we ought not to gratify our appetites any farther than is necessary to maintain health, and to perpetuate the species. Mankind will not so abstain, and if means to prevent the evils that may arise from a farther gratification can be devised, they *need not*. Heaven has not only given us the capacity of greater enjoyment, but the talent of devising means to prevent the evils that are liable to arise therefrom; and it becomes us, "with thanksgiving, to make the most of them."

2. From *The Married Women's Property Acts* (1870; 1882) and subsequent *Amendment Acts* (1874; 1893)

[The 1870 Married Women's Property Act did not yet apply when Besant's husband claimed her earnings for her first published writing

as a young married woman, but it had become law by the time of their separation. The 1870 act and its subsequent 1874 amendment were both in effect when the Knowlton Trial and the trials for custody of her daughter took place, thereby granting her limited concessions as a still-married woman. For more on Besant's ongoing concerns for women's rights at this time, see her pamphlet *The Political Status of Women* (1874) reproduced in Appendix D. The 1882 act had been in place for two years when she wrote *Autobiographical Sketches*, and its amendment was just passing into law when she wrote *An Autobiography*. Incidentally, the last section of each of the four acts reiterates the qualification, "This Act shall not extend to Scotland." Given the complexities of English law, Besant's skill in arguing its finer points without any formal study of the subject or an opportunity to serve an apprenticeship in the field is indeed impressive. For the complete texts from which the following excerpts are taken, see the entries for Griffith and Goodeve in the Select Bibliography of this book, while the reader can look to Lee Holcombe for a through-going analysis in *Wives and Property: Reform of the Married Women's Property Law in Nineteenth-Century England* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1983). The legal text Anglicizes the French terms *femme couverte* and *femme sole* to read *feme covert* and *feme sole*; see note 19 to the introduction of this edition.]

- a. *An Act to amend the Law relating to the Property of Married Women* (9 August 1870); 33 & 34 Victoria, ch. 93

[The 1870 act, consisting of seventeen sections (eight of which are reproduced here), deals with what a married woman might deem her own, or separate, property apart from that of her husband. Although Besant's literary earnings would not have been her property during the first three years of her marriage, this act guaranteed them henceforth. In addition, freehold property coming to a married woman could now be held on her own. Thus, had Besant's mother left her an inheritance when she died in 1874, it would be considered her property even if she had not been legally separated from her husband, but since Mrs. Wood had been defrauded by an unscrupulous financial advisor, she was actually dependent upon her two adult children at her death. Furthermore, this act goes on to establish that a married woman might make certain legal claims against her husband. Previously, as a *femme couverte*, a woman was not recognized as having any legal existence apart from her husband, and therefore she could not sue in equity without a "next friend," i.e., a male, acting on her behalf. Nonetheless, Besant had to have a "next friend" in her custody trial in 1878, for, although a married woman was entitled by this act to "maintain an action," there was apparently no change in the existing practice when she was made a defendant. Of course, with this act came new legal responsibilities for a married woman, as she could now be liable to the parish for the maintenance of her husband and children. And, sad to

say, where the law was open to interpretation—notably by male jurors, lawyers, and judges—actual rulings still favored the husband.]

Whereas it is desirable to amend the law of property and contract with respect to married women:

Be it enacted by the Queen's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:

I. The wages and earning of any married woman acquired or gained by her after the passing of this Act in any employment, occupation, or trade in which she is engaged or which she carries on separately from her husband, and also any money or property so acquired by her through the exercise of any literary, artistic, or scientific skill, and all investments of such wages, earnings, money, or property, shall be deemed and taken to be property held and settled to her separate use, independent of any husband to whom she may be married, and her receipts alone shall be a good discharge for such wages, earnings, money, and property.

II. Notwithstanding any provision to the contrary in the Act of the tenth year of George the Fourth, chapter twenty-four, enabling the Commissioners for the Reduction of the National Debt to grant life annuities and annuities for terms of years, or in the Acts relating to savings banks and post-office savings banks, any deposit hereafter made and any annuity granted by the said Commissioners under any of the said Acts in the name of a married woman, or in the name of a woman who may marry after such deposit or grant, shall be deemed to be the separate property of such woman, and the same shall be accounted for and paid to her as if she were an unmarried woman: provided that if any such deposit is made by, or such annuity granted to, a married woman by means of moneys of her husband without his consent, the Court may, upon an application under section nine of this Act, order such deposit or annuity or any part thereof to be paid to the husband.

VIII. Where any freehold, copyhold, or customaryhold property shall descend upon any woman married after the passing of this Act as heiress or co-heiress of an intestate, the rents and profits of such property shall, subject and without prejudice to the trusts of any settlement affecting the same, belong to such woman for her separate use, and her receipts alone shall be a good discharge for the same.

IX. In any question between husband and wife as to property declared by this Act to be the separate property of the wife, either party may apply by summons or motion in a summary way either to the Court of Chancery in England or Ireland, according as such property is in England or Ireland, or in England (irrespective of the value of the property) the Judge of the County Court of the district in which either party resides, and thereupon the Judge may make such order, direct such inquiry, and award such costs as he shall think fit; provided that any order made by such Judge shall be subject to appeal in the same

manner as the order of the same Judge made in a pending suit or on an equitable plaint would have been and the Judge may, if either party so require, hear the application in his private room.

XI. A married woman may maintain an action in her own name for the recovery of any wages, earnings, money, and property by this Act declared to be her separate property, or of any property belonging to her before marriage, and which her husband shall, by writing under his hand, have agreed with her shall belong to her after marriage as her separate property, and she shall have in her own name the same remedies, both civil and criminal, against all persons whomsoever for the protection and security of such wages, earnings, money, and property, and of chattels or other property purchased or obtained by means thereof for her own use, as if such wages, earnings, money, chattels, and property belonged to her as an unmarried woman; and in any indictment or other proceeding it shall be sufficient to allege such wages, earnings, money, chattels, and property to be her property.

XII. A husband shall not, by reason of any marriage which shall take place after this Act has come into operation, be liable for the debts of his wife contracted before marriage, but the wife shall be liable to be sued for, and any property belonging to her for her separate use shall be liable to satisfy such debts, as if she had continued unmarried.

XIII. Where in England the husband of any woman having separate property becomes chargeable to any union or parish, the justices having jurisdiction in such union or parish may, in petty sessions assembled, upon application of the guardians of the poor, issue a summons against the wife, and make and enforce such order against her for the maintenance of her husband as by the thirty-third section of "The Poor Law Amendment Act, 1868," they may now make and enforce against a husband for the maintenance of his wife who becomes chargeable to any union or parish. Where in Ireland relief is given under the provisions of the Acts relating to the relief of the destitute poor to the husband of any woman having separate property, the cost price of such relief is hereby declared to be a loan from the guardians of the union in which the same shall be given, and shall be recoverable from such woman as if she were a *feme sole* by such and the same actions and proceedings as money lent.

XIV. A married woman having separate property shall be subject to all such liability for the maintenance of her children as a widow is now by law subject to for the maintenance of her children: Provided, always, that nothing in this Act shall relieve her husband from any liability at present imposed upon him by law to maintain her children.

b. *An Act to amend the Married Women's Property Act of 1870* (30 July 1874); 37 & 38 Victoria, ch. 50

[The 1874 amendment act, consisting of seven sections, establishes that a husband and wife may be jointly sued for her debts before mar-

riage, as well as the general grounds for joint and separate judgments against the husband and wife for debt; neither this nor any other of the amendment acts is considered retroactive. Incidentally, 1874 marks the year Besant's mother died as well as the year she met Charles Bradlaugh.]

Whereas it is not just that the property which a woman has at the time of her marriage should pass to her husband, and that he should not be liable for her debts contracted before marriage, and the law as to the recovery of such debts requires amendment:

Be it enacted by the Queen's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:

1. So much of the Married Women's Property Act, 1870, as enacts that a husband shall not be liable for the debts of his wife contracted before marriage is repealed so far as respects marriages which shall take place after the passing of this Act, and a husband and wife married after the passing of this Act may be jointly sued for any such debt.

2. The husband shall, in such action and in any action brought for damages sustained by reason of any tort committed by the wife before marriage, or by reason of the breach of any contract made by the wife before marriage, be liable for the debt or damages respectively to the extent only of the assets hereinafter specified; and in addition to any other plea or pleas may plead that he is not liable to pay the debt or damages in respect of any such assets as hereinafter specified; or, confessing his liability to some amount, that he is not liable beyond what he so confesses; and if no such plea is pleaded the husband shall be deemed to have confessed his liability so far as assets are concerned.

3. If it is not found in such action that the husband is liable in respect of any such assets, he shall have judgment for his costs of defence, whatever the result of the action may be against the wife.

4. When a husband and wife are sued jointly, if by confession or otherwise it appears that the husband is liable for the debt or damages recovered, or any part thereof, the judgment to the extent of the amount for which the husband is liable shall be a joint judgment against the husband and wife, and as to the residue, if any, of such debt or damages, the judgment shall be a separate judgment against the wife.

c. *An Act to consolidate and amend the Married Women's Property Act*
(18 August 1882); 45 & 46 Victoria, ch. 75

[The 1882 act, consisting of twenty-seven sections, determines that a married woman is capable of holding property and of contracting as a *feme sole* and that property of a woman married after the act can be held by her as a *feme sole*. The act further addresses what remedies a married woman has for protection and security of her separate prop-

erty, as well as opening up the possibility of a wife testifying against her husband under conditions not otherwise abrogated. During the course of this year, Besant launched her monthly journal, *Our Corner*, which would within the next two years serve as the initial publishing forum for *Autobiographical Sketches*.]

Be it enacted by the Queen's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same, as follows:

1. (1.) A married woman shall, in accordance with the provisions of this Act, be capable of acquiring, holding, and disposing by will or otherwise, of any real or personal property as her separate property in the same manner as if she were a *feme sole*, without the intervention of any trustee.

1. (2.) A married woman shall be capable of entering into and rendering herself liable in respect of and to the extent of her separate property on any contract, and of suing and being sued, either in contract or in tort, or otherwise, in respects as if she were a *feme sole*, and her husband need not be joined with her as plaintiff or defendant, or be made a party to any action or other legal proceeding brought by or taken against her: and any damages or costs recovered by her in any such action or proceeding shall be her separate property; and any damages or costs recovered against her in any such action or proceeding shall be payable out of her separate property, and not otherwise.

2. Every woman who marries after the commencement of this Act shall be entitled to have and to hold as her separate property and to dispose of in manner aforesaid all real and personal property which shall belong to her at the time, of marriage, or shall be acquired by or devolve upon her after marriage, including any wages, earnings, money, and property gained or acquired by her in any employment, trade, or occupation, in which she is engaged, or which she carries on separately from her husband, or by the exercise of any literary, artistic, or scientific skill.

★ ★ ★

12. Every woman, whether married before or after this Act, shall have in her own name against all persons whomsoever, including her husband, the same civil remedies, and also (subject, as regards her husband, to the proviso herein-after contained) the same remedies and redress by way of criminal proceedings, for the protection and security of her own separate property, as if such property belonged to her as a *feme sole*, but, except as aforesaid, no husband or wife shall be entitled to sue the other for a tort. In any indictment or other proceeding under this section it shall be sufficient to allege such property to be her property; and in any proceeding under this section a husband or wife shall be competent to give evidence against each other, any statute or rule of law to the contrary notwithstanding: Provided always that no crim-

inal proceeding shall be taken by any wife against her husband by virtue of this Act while they are living together, as to or concerning any property claimed by her, nor while they are living apart, as to or concerning any act done by the husband while they were living together, concerning property claimed by the wife, unless such property shall have been wrongfully taken by the husband when leaving or deserting, or about to leave or desert, his wife.

- d. *An Act to amend the Married Women's Property Act of 1882* (5 December 1893); 56 & 57 Victoria, ch. 63

[The 1893 amendment act, consisting of six sections, states the effect of contracts by married women and establishes that costs may be ordered to be paid out of property subject to "restraint on anticipation." According to English law, although property may be settled upon a married woman for her separate use, when she is in a state of *coverture* (i.e., presumed under the protection of her husband), she cannot anticipate (or draw upon) its income. Restraint on anticipation is removed if she should become a widow, but it may be applied again if she remarries. 1893 is the year in which *An Autobiography* was published.]

Be it enacted by the Queen's most Excellent Majesty, by and with the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons, in this present Parliament assembled, and by the authority of the same as follows:

1. Every contract hereafter entered into by a married woman, otherwise than as agent, (a) shall be deemed to be a contract entered into by her with respect to and to bind her separate property whether she is or is not in fact possessed of or entitled to any separate property at the time when she enters into such contract;

(b) shall bind all separate property which she may at that time or thereafter be possessed of or entitled to; and

(c) shall also be enforceable by process of law against all property which she may thereafter while discover¹ be possessed of or entitled to:

Provided that nothing in this section contained shall render available to satisfy any liability or obligation arising out of such contract any separate property which at that time or thereafter she is restrained from anticipating.

2. In any action or proceeding how or hereafter instituted by a woman or by a next friend on her behalf, the court before which such action or proceeding is pending shall have jurisdiction by judgement or order from time to time to order payment of the costs of the opposite party out of property which is subject to a restraint on anticipation, and may enforce such payment by the appointment of a receiver and the sale of the property or otherwise may be just.

1 discover: unmarried.

3. *Socialism: For and Against*, A Written Debate between Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant, *Our Corner* 9 (1887); rpt. London: Liberty and Property Defence League

[This written debate between Besant and Bradlaugh appeared over a four-month period in her journal *Our Corner* during its penultimate year of publication. Besant had announced her shift in ideological allegiance the preceding year with her Freethought pamphlet *Why I Am a Socialist*, but she resisted a more partisan declaration because so many Socialists savagely critiqued Bradlaugh's opposition. In general, Secularists opposed Socialism because they retained a strong belief in individualism, and Bradlaugh's views were variously reprinted and cited by anti-Socialist publications throughout the 1880s. Both Bradlaugh's oral debate with H.M. Hyndman (1884) and his written exchange with E. Belfort Bax (1887) were published under the title posing the same rhetorical question—*Will Socialism Benefit the English People?*—by the Liberty and Property Defence League. As for Besant, she first aligned herself with the less radical Fabian Socialists, contributing along with Shaw and the Webbs (see their history of Trade Unionism in the next entry of this appendix) to several popular essay collections based on their own speeches; her entry in Shaw's edition of *Fabian Essays in Socialism* (1889) is entitled "Industry under Socialism." In addition, she wrote about Socialism broadly in the periodical press (*Justice*, *Link*, *To-Day*, and *Labour Leader*), and she devoted an entire chapter to the subject in *An Autobiography*. The reader is also directed to Foote's "review" of Besant's *Modern Socialism* (1890) and her rejoinder in Appendix A, as well as to Shaw's twentieth-century compendium, *An Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism* (1928).

Besant published a final exchange not excerpted here in the June issue of *Our Corner*. In "Socialism: Its Fallacies and Dangers" (321-24), which he subtitled "Rough Notes by Way of a Rejoinder," Bradlaugh continues to stress collegiality and good will when he takes up the debate again; after all, he is writing in the pages of *Our Corner*, which was essentially a shared enterprise between him and Besant. Clearly both discussants are adept at citing historical precedents, but at this point in the debate this practice begins to seem more like an evasive tactic than as providing substantive proof. This mincing of words devolves into what we might today acknowledge as the result of many different manifestations of Socialism, that is, the existence of Socialisms. This is a problematic more typical of infighting within a particular political program than between ideological opponents, however, recognizing as it does how many different angles might be taken on a single issue. And in Socialism's initially projected impact on Britain we can see as much divisiveness as commonality. In "A Few Words in Final Reply" (324-27), Besant tries to use her final word as an opportunity to clarify the terms raised by the debate. If she can sort

things out, she may in many respects have the advantage in this debate. And if it does all come down to a matter of definitions and sorting them out in order to establish the real grounds of difference, then all this effort at defining terms precisely is to the purpose. In effect, Besant still finds the two of them on the same side, despite their differently declared allegiances.

Ultimately, their debate provides a prime example of how two socially committed friends might agree to disagree about what was beginning to come to the fore in the way of different approaches to social reform in the 1880s, and how a falling out might well start between two otherwise close colleagues. Perhaps Besant could be accused of being too much the idealist (note her initial title, referring to the “Truths and Hopes” of Socialism), while Bradlaugh is the practical politician who has served longer in the trenches (he both times uses the same title, warning of Socialism’s “Fallacies and Dangers”). In many respects, she sincerely believes that if Socialism is truly understood, there can be no objection to it—an interesting form of “persuasion” on her part. Her final paragraph reads as follows:

All I have sought to do in my brief criticisms of Mr. Bradlaugh’s objections to Socialism has been to show that they do not go to the root of the question of Socialism, that they do not even touch the central position of Socialism. Looking out at the future of the workers in the country, pressed as they are by increasing foreign competition, I can see no hope for them save in their control of their own labor, and their possession of all which is necessary for the production of wealth. As chattel-slavery and serfage so, I believe, must wage-slavery perish, and then shall man’s dominion over man disappear, and liberty shall be a reality instead of a name. (*OC* 9.6: 327)

As with all debates, it is interesting to consider the relative advantages of the order of presentation—the first speaker sets the groundwork but the second determines the choice of specific rebuttals, while the last establishes the (apparent) final word.]

- a. Charles Bradlaugh, “Socialism: Its Fallacies and Dangers,” *Our Corner* 9.3 (March 1887): 129–36

[Ever the lawyer and parliamentary debater, Bradlaugh starts out on the attack, yet from the outset he also makes clear the importance of establishing a working definition of their key term—not something so easy to do, however, given the fact of multiple Socialisms being developed at this period in the Anglo-American experience. In fact, Bradlaugh is sometimes guilty of advancing rather slippery distinctions between Socialism and Communism, although his examples demonstrate how Socialist commentary often invites such confusion in the first place. It is worth noting the range of publications to which he

refers, as they point to the regular war of pro and con debate about Socialism being played out in the periodical press on both sides of the Atlantic, including Besant's wide-flung participation in the overall contest.]

My greatest difficulty in treating this subject is in discovering any general agreement as to what is now meant in England by the word "Socialism." There are so many grades and shades of diverse opinion loosely included in, and attacked, or defended, as Socialism, that—in default of any authoritative, or official, or even generally accepted definition—I will at any rate make clear what it is that I attack as Socialism, and will endeavor at least to show that even if I am in error, I have been misled by Socialist writers, and have not invented the definition, or arbitrarily framed a formula, or built up a man of straw, for the mere purpose of attack. I understand and define Socialism as (1) denying, or destroying, all individual property; and (2) as affirming that Society organised as the State should own all wealth, direct all labor, and compel the equal distribution of all produce. I understand a Socialist State to be (3) that State in which all labor would be controlled by the State, which from the common stock would maintain the laborer, and would take all the produce of the labor. That is (4), I identify Socialism with Communism.

* * *

Some of the English Socialists claim to base their theories more or less directly upon the doctrines of Karl Marx, yet the manifesto which he issued conjointly with Engels in 1847 was expressly Communistic. There is one passage of it which has been often quoted: "The Communists scorn to conceal their views and purposes. They declare openly that their aims can be attained only by a violent overthrow of the existing social order. Let the ruling classes tremble before a Communistic Revolution."

And the use of force is contemplated by an editorial writer in *Justice*, No. 157, who says:

It is for us then to compel the Government by every means in our power—using the argument of words or the argument of force, just as it suits our purpose—to carry into effect these proposals of ours which will necessarily lead to the complete emancipation of the workers.

Whilst my identification of Socialism with Communism is admitted by some Socialist writers and speakers, it is as distinctly and even vehemently repudiated by others, and is clearly challenged by many whose views are entitled to respectful and thorough examination. A careful examination of the various utterances compels me, for reasons I shall set out, to adhere to my own definition. Many who describe themselves

as Socialists I should describe as social reformers, and with these I am mostly in sympathy as to the evils they seek to redress, although I cannot accept the methods of remedy they propose. Mrs. Besant—of whose earnest devotion to the movement for alleviating human suffering it is impossible to speak of too highly—thinks that she so defines Socialism as to clearly distinguish it from Communism. In her pamphlet “Modern Socialism” she says:

Communism implies the complete abolition of private property and the supply of the wants of each individual from a common store, without regard to the contributions to that common store which may, or may not, have been made by the individual. Socialism merely implies that the raw material of the soil and the means of production shall not be the private property of individuals, but shall be under the control of the community; it leaves intact a man’s control over himself and over the value of his work—subject to such general laws as are necessary in any community—but by socialising land and capital it deprives each of the power of enslaving his fellows and of living in idleness on the results of their labor instead of on the results of his own.

It is right to add that Mrs. Besant says most distinctly that “for man as he is Communism would mean the living of the idle on the toil of the laborious.” It is unfortunate that on her own definition Socialism must—as I think can be made clear—if attempted in practice be Communism, or nothing but conflict and incoherence. It is clear, according to Mrs. Besant, that Socialism denies private property in land and capital. She defines capital as the accumulated unconsumed result of labor applied to raw material if devoted to purposes of profit. She endeavors to separate and distinguish capital from wealth. Wealth with her is the accumulated unconsumed result of labor applied to raw material, so long as it is not attempted to utilise such result for profit. Mrs. Besant would preserve private property in “wealth” in the lands of the laborer who created it. I do not think continuance of such private property possible under the terms of her own definition. There are many conceivable cases in which the surplus result of labor may fairly be reckoned as “means of production,” and would then forthwith cease to be the private property of the laborer. It is clear that the “wealth” admitted to be private property would often be susceptible of use as “capital,” and would then only remain private property while not utilised for increase.

The “wealth” which continued private property, whilst unproductive to anyone, would if converted, say, into the plant of a newspaper printing office, cease to be private property. There are some so-called Socialists, though I am not sure if Mrs. Besant would include herself with these, who would permit the ownership, as private property, of such wealth as would not enable the owner to avoid personal labor. In this description would come books, pictures, statuary, ornaments, household

furniture, etc., though there is difference of opinion as to whether these descriptions of wealth may pass to others as private property by gift, inheritance, or bequest. It would be certainly in conflict with the definition that such chattels could be sold; as this must open the door to trading for profit, and it is difficult to imagine how any new articles of this kind are ever to be acquired by individuals if trade for profit is forbidden, as it would be when the thing if used for profit reverted to the State. Of course a great deal turns on what is meant by the "means of production" being "under the control of the community." At present machinery, plant, tools of the roughest and most minute and delicate character are manufactured, and stored to await purchasers, at the risk of those who, for possible profit, wait the convenience of the customer needing each article; but how is all this to be regulated when the means of production are under the control of the community? Under what conditions is the manufacture of means of production otherwise than for possible profit to be arranged; and how are such "means of production" to be placed at the service of the individual worker? Mrs. Besant complains that in our present complex system, a would-be laborer "cannot get an instrument of production, and if he could he would have nothing to use it on; he has nothing but his labor-force, and he must either sell that to some one who wants it or he must die." This is not quite accurate. The laborer, if he would unite in co-operative combination with other laborers, could now in many departments of industry obtain instruments of production and many kinds of raw material. It is true that in all kinds of mining industry the landowner has over-weighted industry in very many instances with oppressive and almost prohibitive royalties. It is also true that the landlord has crippled agriculture, and often paralysed manufacture by rents and restrictive covenants. This may, and I hope will, be remedied by the legislature. The landowners' so-called rights are in these cases purely artificial creations. They are the result of law made by a class legislature, in which the landed interest was then all-powerful and labor was then unrepresented. But how under Socialism is the individual to obtain for his individual use and his individual advantage the means of production and raw material, both of which are the property of the State? Does Mrs. Besant mean that in every-day life each citizen should have equal right to require the local representative of the State to place at her or his sole and uncontrolled disposition, and for such period as the worker may please, such raw material and means of production as the worker is of opinion may be necessary to enable him to get the best value for his work? If yes, where is the control of the means of production by the State? If no, how can the scheme leave "intact a man's control over himself and over the value of his work"? Some Socialists certainly do not intend to "leave intact a man's control over himself," for in the pamphlet entitled "Socialism Made Plain," signed by Herbert Burrows, H.H. Champion, H.M. Hyndman, and W[illiam] Morris, the "organisation of agricultural and industrial armies under State control" is advocated. Either this means that each individ-

ual must perform the labor task fixed for him by some State official or officials—much as in the army the soldier obeys his commanding officer—or it means nothing. Returning to Mrs. Besant's definition: How are the several officials having charge of raw material and of means of production to determine each individual's ability to utilise the special means or material demanded? Is the determination to be made by officials locally chosen to act in each locality or nationally chosen to act for the whole country? And how will it be possible to avoid favoritism and injustice in apportioning pleasant and easy employment as against unpleasant and difficult kinds of labor? May a man who thinks that he can make a watch or a delicate and costly machine insist on being furnished with the necessary means and material? How is the wilful damage or deterioration by an incapable worker of the material or means of production entrusted to him to be guarded against? How is the abandonment, involving perhaps enormous loss, of a difficult or unpleasant industry to be prevented? On what conditions, if any, are instruments of production to be furnished to the laborer? If more laborers demand at one time a kind of "means of production" than the State has at its immediate command, how is a selection to be made, and how are the laborers to be maintained who cannot work at the labor they have selected, and who will not work at any other? May the guardian of the means, or of the instruments, select which he shall furnish, or must they go "first come first served," without reference to fitness? In a word, can you have State control of industry and yet leave intact the freedom of the worker? When all raw material is the property of the State, and the added value of labor is the private property of the laborer, may the person who by his labor has added value to some portion take that portion away to a foreign market where he believes the highest value will be obtainable for the manufactured article? If yes, where is the guarantee that the sale value of the raw material will ever come back into this country? If the State is to control the sale of the finished article where is the worker's intact control of the value of his work? It is true that Messrs. Hyndman and Morris say "that exchange of produce should be social too and removed from the control of individual greed and individual profit." But exchange (that is, trade) has to be conducted with many foreign countries, from which we get raw material not producible here, and necessities of food and medicine not grown within the limits of our own land. How is the great carrying trade of the country to be enterprised when the incitement of possible profit to the trader is erased?

"Socialism," says Mr. Hyndman ("Debate," p. 5), "is an endeavor to substitute for the anarchical struggle or fight for existence an organised co-operation for existence." While it is true that the struggle for existence has been far too bitter not only between employer and employed but also between the workers themselves, the brunt of the struggle being most severe on the poorest and weakest, the word "anarchical" is hardly explanatory as a word of description. The meaning of the definition depends on the translation of the words "organised co-operation." Voluntary co-opera-

tion is organised co-operation determinable—subject to the co-operative agreement—at the will of each co-operator, so far as he or she is concerned, but as each co-operator receives profit on his investment as well as his labor, and can withdraw his capital if he be not satisfied, this clearly is not what Mr. Hyndman meant, and when in debate he was pressed for explanation none was given. Mr. Joynes, commenting on this, rebuked the demand on the ground that “no scientific Socialist pretends to have any scheme or detailed plan of organisation.” Surely to talk of organisation and yet to have no scheme is to waste words in the air. Mr. Hyndman did explain what he meant by anarchy. “There is,” he said, “many a man who works as a skilled laborer to-day who if a machine is invented whereby man may benefit, will be turned out to compete against his fellows on the streets to-morrow. That is what I say is anarchy” (“Debate,” p. 7); and he recommended as the cure for this “the collective ownership of land, capital, machinery, and credit by the complete ownership of the people.” It is true that the introduction of each new labor-saving invention in machinery does deprive persons of methods of livelihood to which they have become accustomed. It is true that if the individual worker is advanced in life he will have great difficulty in adapting himself to new kinds of skilled employment. But it is not true that the introduction of machinery has permanently reduced the aggregate number of workers in the country where most machinery is used, nor is it true that the ratio of pauperism to population has, on the whole, increased in the countries where most machinery has been introduced. Mr. Hyndman’s definition in the end means Communism or it means nothing. If the collective ownership of everything except labor, and the collective control of all the produce of labor for exchange, is not the total negation of private property, then words have no meaning.

Mrs. Besant says that “capital under our present industrial system is the result of unpaid labor.” Most certainly this is not true of all capital: such capital as is now in the hands of the wage-paid laborer himself, or has been handed by him to others, can hardly come under this category. The illustrations may be given, say, in the 583,830 members of building societies, owning £52,611,198; 284,976 members of registered trade unions, owning £538,542; 572,610 members of co-operative societies, owning £8,209,722; 46,710 members of registered loan societies, owning £324,281; 1,582,474 savings bank depositors, owning £45,847,887 4s. 3d., this not including the 7,288 depositors in railway savings banks, owning £586,260; 2,300,000 members of friendly societies, owning £—;² members of industrial assurance societies registered as limited companies, owning £3,834,709. In the enormous number of small shareholders in home and foreign railways, in banks, in manufacturing concerns, small holders of consolidated stock, owners of small houses or plots of land not included in the building society statistics, small shopkeepers and the like, there must be an addition of capital

2 Author’s note: the last returns are not made up; but the membership is now, I believe, over 2,500,000.

which has been accumulated by the laborer out of payment received by him for his labor. Nor does the challenge to definition even stop at this point. The tailor sells to the laborer clothing cheaper than the laborer could make it; the clothing is necessary for the laborer; on each article of clothing a small profit is made by the tailor, and on the balance of many such transactions, and after deducting the expenses of his business, there is a surplus “capital”; but it might well be that none of this “capital” was the result of unpaid labor. So of the baker, the butcher, the grocer, similar illustrations may be given. Even the capital of the great manufacturer who, employing hundreds or thousands of hands, grows rich in a brief space of years, is not always, or wholly, “the result of unpaid labor.” A keen judgment which first utilises a new material as alpaca or alfa,³ or which initiates a fresh method of dealing with old material, or which discovers a market or employment of produce hitherto overlooked by others, may be rewarded by accumulated capital, which it is scarcely fair to describe as “the result of unpaid labor.” Of course, all “wealth” originates with labor on raw material, but all capital is not the value of labor which has never been paid to the laborer.

Mrs. Besant—moved, and very properly moved intensely, by the suffering around her—is a little one-sided even in her coldest presentments. Take as illustration the following, vouched by her as “a statement of the facts as they are”: “The worker produces a mass of commodities; the capitalist sells these commodities for what they will fetch in the market; ... the capitalist gives over to the producer sufficient of the results of the sale to enable the producer to exist, and pockets the remainder.” Now this is not “the facts as they are” at all. The following corrected presentment would, I think, better represent the facts as they are: The worker, aided by the capitalist who furnishes raw material and means of production, produces a mass of commodities, and is paid by the capitalist a sum for his labor which seldom leaves a large margin over subsistence; the capitalist then sells these commodities for what they will fetch, recoups himself thereout for disbursements for raw material, working expenditure, and wages, pockets the remainder, if any, and bears the whole loss if the transaction should be unprofitable.

It is not that Mrs. Besant had herself overlooked the facts here restated; she gives them fairly enough at the top of the previous page of her own pamphlet (“Modern Socialism,” p.15).

- b. Annie Besant, “Socialism: Its Truths and Its Hopes” (A Reply),
Our Corner 9.4 (April 1887): 193-200

[Besant, too, very much participates in the rhetoric of the speechmaker, and like Bradlaugh, she maintains the integrity of a friendly disputant, making every effort to show that there is “nothing personal” in her disagreement with him. In fact, seeking some common ground, she finds

3 alfa: a North African grass used in the making of paper.

it in the inclusiveness of the “Radical” designation that is key to both their public histories. She deploys her advantage of coming second by refuting his charges in the order of their presentation, often utilizing literary comparisons to drive home her points. Sometimes, however, it is difficult to tell whether she is quibbling over minor distinctions or getting to the root of the matter. This kind of nitpicking may be necessary to the discussion, but it is time-consuming—and often ends up obstructing genuinely constructive debate because most debaters have to begin again from scratch when it is their turn for rebuttal. Nonetheless, in her defense, some of Besant’s specific speculative scenarios serve to clarify the issues, in contrast to some of the ludicrous implications introduced elsewhere by other proponents of Socialism. Besant is quick to admit that she is not spelling out every detail of her formulation, that it is still a work in progress, and she displays a willingness to accept criticism—and then revise accordingly. It is perhaps helpful to read Besant’s reply in the context of the newly developing social science of Sociology, as well as to consider her contribution to finding a compromise between Utopian and Scientific Socialism.]

Knowing, as I do, that the one aim of my friend and colleague, Charles Bradlaugh, in dealing with the social problem, is to seek the best possible solution of a vexed and difficult question, and knowing also that my own aim is identical with his, I accept the challenge to criticise his paper as frankly as it was given, trusting that the honest speech of two honest thinkers may be useful to the students of Sociology.

The difficulty felt by Mr. Bradlaugh “in discovering any general agreement as to what is now meant in England by ‘Socialism’” is a difficulty felt by all who endeavor to define with scientific accuracy a rough-and-ready popular name. The suggested alternative, “Social Reformers,” would be even less definitive than the name “Socialists,” for I am not aware of a single principle on which all Social Reformers are agreed; and it would, for instance, classify me with men like Lord Brabazon and Mr. Arnold White, to whose proposals and methods I am vehemently opposed. Every name which is borne by a political party covers a wide variety of opinions, and is exclusive rather than inclusive; it suggests what is rejected rather than what is accepted. The Radical may be taken as a denier of the divine right of kings, but his party name does not tell if he be constitutional Monarchist or Republican. In every advanced party “there are so many grades and shades of diverse opinion”; this variety is the condition of progress. Only in parties which exist by repeating shibboleths of the past can uniformity of opinion be looked for. No political party includes more grades of diverse opinion than does the best of them all, the Radical, and this diversity is a proof of its vitality. The name Radical is worn by Land Nationalisers and by promoters of peasant proprietorship; by Local Optionists and by the supporters of free trade in drink; by advocates and opponents of compulsory vaccination; by Home Rulers and anti-Home Rulers; by men who would increase, and by men

who would decrease, the sphere of the State. If a party is to be attacked *as a party*, it must be attacked on some principle on which it is agreed, and not on the principles on which its sections differ. While it is fair to attack any individual Radical writer for opinions put forward by him, it would not be fair to father all his individual eccentricities on Radicalism; and while it is just to attack any individual Socialist writer for the opinions he advances, it is not just to foist all his personal views on Socialism.

Mr. Bradlaugh, however, wisely defines Socialism before he assails it, and thus enables his readers to grasp the views he is attacking. He writes:

I understand and define Socialism as (1) denying, or destroying, all individual private property; and (2) as affirming that society organised as the State should own all wealth, direct all labor, and compel the equal distribution of all produce. I understand a Socialistic State to be (3) that State in which everything would be common as to its user, and in which all labor would be controlled by the State, which from the common stock would maintain the laborer, and would take all the produce of the labor. That is (4), I identify Socialism with Communism.

My first objection to this definition is that it excludes the vast majority of Socialists, if indeed it includes any, and it will be easy for me to show that the quotations by which Mr. Bradlaugh seeks to support it are insufficient for the task. (1) might possibly be accepted by the small group of Anarchists of whom, in England, Peter Kropotkin may be taken as a representative, but it is not accepted by the Collectivist school, which forms the great majority of the Socialist party in every civilised country. It is not accepted by Marx, Engels, Bebel, in Germany; by Schäffle, in Austria; by Colins, Agathon de Potter, in Belgium; by Gronlund in America; by the leading English Socialist writers. Marx and Engels say, in their famous "Manifesto to the Communists" of 1847: "When capital is converted into common property belonging to all members of society, personal property is not thereby changed into social property.... By no means do we want to abolish this personal appropriation of labor products for the support of life, an appropriation which leaves no surplus proceeds, no profit, and which can gain no control over other people's labor.... Communism deprives no one of the power to appropriate social products for his own use; it only deprives him of the power to subject others' labor by such appropriation" (pp. 14, 15). Bebel describes the worker as receiving "any kind of certificate, a printed piece of paper, gold, or brass," as a token of the time spent in labor, and this he can exchange for what he requires. "If he finds that his requirements are less than those covered by that which he receives for his work, he can work a correspondingly shorter time. If he prefers to give away his superfluity, no one can prevent him.... But no one can compel him to work for another, and no one can deprive him of a part of his claims for the work done" ("Woman in the Past, Present, and Future," pp. 193, 194). Schäffle says that workmen are to be paid accord-

ing to the quantity and the quality of the work they do (see *Fortnightly Review*, April, 1883, p. 556). Colins absolutely leaves untouched hereditary succession to property in the direct line, while vesting land and capital in the State (see *Ibid*, p. 555). Gronlund writes: "Instead of taking property away from everyone, it will enable everyone to acquire property. It will confirm the institution of individual ownership by placing property on an unimpeachable basis: that of being the result of the owner's exertions" ("Co-operative Commonwealth," p. 81). H.M. Hyndman, W[illiam] Morris, and J.L. Joynes, as Mr. Bradlaugh admits, deny that they attack private property, save that form of it which renders it impossible for millions, *i.e.*, as we shall see later, private property in the material of wealth-production. I submit, then, that these representative writers disprove that Socialism is that which it is affirmed to be in (1). (2) falls with (1), and it may be added that the "equal distribution of all produce" is no essential part of Socialism, as may be seen from the above citations. (3) appears to me to put forward a view impossible of realisation; how can "everything be common as to its user" when the necessity for individual use must imply individual possession? A pair of boots cannot be common as to the user, since the use of them by one person renders impossible their use by another. How would it be possible for the State—if by the State is meant any central authority—to control and direct all labor, since for effective direction of labor the directors must be on the spot with the labor? How can there be a "common stock" for a whole nation? In what Socialist work can these, or similar proposals, be found? None of the quotations given by Mr. Bradlaugh justify such assumptions. In (4) we read: "I identify Socialism with Communism." But if discussion of controverted questions is to be instructive, of what use is it to identify arbitrarily two schools which claim to be distinct, and which are recognised as distinct by all Socialists and by most Individualists? There is a sense in which the word "Communism" is used by Collectivist writers such as Marx, to which I shall presently refer, but the Communism which is sketched in Mr. Bradlaugh's four propositions is not the Communism of Marx. Surely nothing would be gained if in arguing against Radicalism I used the word Liberalism to include the most stationary of old Whigs and the most progressive of modern Radicals, and then, stating that I identified Whiggism and Radicalism, went on to quote some of the most fossil utterances of the Duke of Argyll, alleging that in demolishing these I had demolished Radicalism? I do not fancy that such line of attack would convince many Radicals.

The quotations given by Mr. Bradlaugh to establish his case are sufficient to show the nature of the private property which is attacked by all Socialists, and the principle on which Socialists are agreed.

Messrs. William Morris and E. Belfort Bax say: "The land, the capital, the machinery, factories workshops, stores, means of transit, mines, banking, all means of production and distribution of wealth, must be declared and treated as the common property of

all" ("Manifesto of the Socialist League," p. 6); and that there may be no misapprehension as to what this means Mr. Bax writes: "That for which the working classes have to strive is nothing less than for Communism or a collectivist Socialism, understanding by this the assumption by the democratic State, of land, raw material, instruments of production, funded capital, etc." ("Religion of Socialism," p. 78); and again, the same writer says: "Socialism has been well described as a new conception of the world presenting itself in industry as co-operative Communism" (p. 81).

There is no word here of the destruction of all private property; but there is the claim for the appropriation by the community of all material necessary for the production of wealth. And this is the fundamental position of Socialism; on other matters there may be diversity of opinion, but on this there is none. With regard to this material it is that the claim for "Communism" is made; Mr. Bax above defines Communism as "the concentration in the hands of a democratic State" of this material, not of all wealth. This, again, is the "Communism" advocated by Marx. When he has stated his objection to "that system of production and the appropriation of products which rests on the antagonism of classes—on the spoliation of the many by the few," he goes on: "*In this sense* (italics mine) the Communists can reduce their whole theory to one expression: the abolition of private property" (p. 13). He then proceeds to rebut the accusation that Communists "wish to destroy property which is the product of a man's labor—earned by his own work; that property, which forms the basis of all personal liberty, activity, and independence—personally earned, personally acquired property." And showing that the proletarian's work produces capital, "a species of property which plunders wage-labor," he states that it is this which is to be made "common property." Historically, Communism has implied a condition of things very different from that advocated by Marx, and a Communistic society, always small, has really had a "common stock." Such an arrangement is only possible in a small community, and would be utterly unworkable for a nation. It may well be questioned whether Marx was wise in using in a new sense a term already applied to a form of social organisation which he did not desire to establish; still, he showed plainly the sense in which he was using it, and it is only just to take terms with the definitions attached to them by those who use them. I have myself used the term Communism in the older sense, in my pamphlet "Modern Socialism," quoted by Mr. Bradlaugh, but Marx's use of the word must be taken with Marx's limitations.

I am not able to defend the position taken up by Peter Kropotkin, the Anarchist school being opposed to the Collectivist in all questions of method and organisation; but I would point out that he does not apparently mean to make everything quite common property, since he says: "Our opponents say to us, 'venture to touch the peasant's plot of ground or the mechanic's cottage, and see how they will receive you.'

Very well! But we shall not interfere with the plot of ground nor with the cottage" ("Expropriation," p. 5). So far as I understand the Anarchist ideal of social reorganisation, it includes a system of federated communes, each commune to have a common stock; but I have not succeeded in obtaining any clear idea of the relations supposed to exist between the communes.

I come to Mr. Bradlaugh's criticism of my own position [in last month's issue of *Our Corner*]. I agree that Socialism denies that there should be private property in wealth-material. But the objection that I distinguish "wealth" and "capital" is, if valid against me, valid against every writer on political economy. I did not invent a new, but accepted the current, distinction. And the distinction is not wholly fictitious. If one man owned in a country the whole material necessary for the production of wealth, no wealth could be produced without his consent; if one man owned all the commodities in a country, but the people could reach the material needed for production, they could make the commodities they required. Private Property in the first case means submission to the owner thereof or starvation; private property in the second case, however absurd in such an exaggerated form, leaves the people free to feed and clothe themselves with the new results of their own labor.

The whole of the [long] paragraph [concluding with the question "How is the great carrying trade of the country to be enterprised when the incitement of possible profit to the trader is erased?"] appears to me to be based on a radical misconception of the change proposed by the "Scientific Socialists." They do not propose to make a number of laws: "A man shall not work for himself"; "A man shall not save up his wages, and let out his savings at interest"; any more than they propose to make a law, "A man who is going to swim across a river shall not handcuff his wrists together and tie a 20-lb. weight to each foot." What the Scientific Socialist proposes to do is to take over the land and the total capital of the country (plan, means of transit, banks, etc.) into the hands of the community; those who want to earn a living, *i.e.*, all healthy adults, will have to utilise this material. Suppose the Northumberland Miners' Association desire to work the Northumberland mines, they would have to pay rent to the State (the whole community) for the right to work them; suppose the nail-makers [sic] of a town desired to utilise the factories in which they had worked as "hands," they would have to pay rent to the State for the use of land, factory, plant, etc. And now suppose that an individual nailmaker, dissatisfied with his work in the co-operative factory, determined to save some of his earnings and set up nailmaking on his own account. Need the State be convulsed, need his deserted fellow-workers of the factory cry out for a law to stop him? Not a bit of it. Unless the whole experience of the last century as to the advantages of division of labor and of large production over small be a delusion, the co-operative workers may look on at the individual capitalist with extreme serenity. If his nails

cost ten, twenty, fifty, times as much as theirs to produce, who is going to be foolish enough to buy them, say at a shilling, when they can buy similar ones at a farthing? The capitalist now is the tyrant of the worker because he can say to him, "Work for me, or starve." The attempt of a man to be a capitalist under Socialism would be entertaining, but harmless. He could not compel any man to work for him by threat of starvation on refusal. The human desire to get as much as possible for as little labor as possible will very rapidly put an end to profit-mongering, not because none will be willing to be made a profit of by another, when starvation does not force him into submission. Once let monopoly in the material of wealth be destroyed, and the "natural forces" at work in society will settle the small matters without the interference of artificial laws.

Nor must it be supposed that I have devised this view of the subject merely to cut the ground from under the feet of Mr. Bradlaugh's objection. E. Belfort Bax, in his "Religion of Socialism," has dealt with a similar point in a similar manner:

M. Leroy-Beaulien sneeringly complains that, under a Collectivist *régime*, no one would be allowed to mend his neighbor's trousers or shirt for a monetary consideration, inasmuch as he would then be employing his needle and thread for purposes of production, which would be a return to Individualism, and hence illegal. Let M. Leroy-Beaulien reassure himself. All those who desire to make a living by an individualistic mending of shirts and trousers will be allowed full liberty to satisfy their aspirations so far as any judicial coercion is concerned. We will not vouch for their being much patronised, for the probability of repairs of this character being executed better, more rapidly, and with less expenditure of labor in the communal workshop is great. But in any case, they would have their economic liberty to fatten on. (p. 41)

Looking over the details of the paragraph which I have subjected to the above sweeping criticism, some further points may be noted. Machinery, tools, etc., would be made when they were likely to be wanted, and stored till wanted, as now; it is hard to see where the difficulty here arises. The laborers now can unite in co-operative production to a small extent, but their attempts have failed, one of the chief reasons being that their command of capital is too small to enable them to compete with the big capitalist. I have above spoken of the individual worker starting on his own account, and so have partly answered Mr. Bradlaugh's question on this head; if he wants to get raw material and private means of production he will have to save up and purchase them from the community, and so buy the razor to cut his own foolish throat. No officer need trouble himself about the "individual's ability to utilise the special means or material demanded"; all he has to do is to receive from the applicant the value of that which he demands; the individual

will have to judge his own ability, and if he blunders he will have only himself to blame. The difficulty of apportioning pleasant and unpleasant labor may be met in many ways; the unpleasant might be more highly paid, so that a short term of one might balance a longer term of another. Speaking generally, these matters will be settled by the law of supply and demand. As men's tastes differ, and technical education will have trained men for different forms of work, taste and education will play a large part in determining a man's work. Suppose a man is a weaver, and finds that there is no vacancy for a weaver in the factories of the town he is living in, he might apply at the municipal branch of the Labor Bureau—an establishment for which every Socialist must thank Charles Bradlaugh, and the full value of which will only be felt under Socialism—and learn in what town there are vacancies in his trade. If over the whole country there is no vacancy, he will have to accept temporary employment in some other industry, and he can leave his name on the books of the Bureau for the next vacancy. But are not all these questions based on the old idea that Socialism has a cast-iron scheme, with every detail mapped out on paper, and do they not rather imply that everyone is to be a perfect fool? We are not Utopian Socialists; we have no sudden cure-all for every ill which afflicts society; but we say that the private monopoly of the material of wealth means payment to idle individuals by the workers, and that any payment made by them for the use of this material should be made to the State, and used for the benefit of the community. The exact details of the working could only be given by one endowed with the spirit of prophecy, and many such matters will have to be solved by the common-sense and business experience of the administrators.

The worker's "control" over "the value of his work" does not mean that a man will have a right to "some portion" of a product to which he has added value. It means that where he has given so many hours of labor, and has received some symbol of exchange which represents their value, he may use that symbol of exchange as he pleases. Twenty workmen co-operate to produce a carved sideboard; it is not proposed that the workmen shall have the sideboard divided among them, so that one may carry his piece abroad, but that each shall receive a labor-note—or whatever the form of payment be—for the value given by work, and that each can use this as he pleases. The finished article might lie in the communal stores till wanted by an individual or a group who were prepared to pay for it as much labor as was required to produce it.

Mr. Bradlaugh, quoting Mr. Hyndman's proposal as the "collective ownership of land, capital, machinery, and credit," says:

Mr. Wyndman's definition in the end means Communism or it means nothing. If the collective ownership of everything except labor, and the collective control of all the produce of labor for exchange, is not the total negation of private property, then words have no meaning.

But is this so? Mr. Bradlaugh does not consider that the capitalist monopoly of "everything except labor," and the capitalist "control of all the produce of labor for exchange" is the "total negation of private property," although it implies the continued confiscation of the results of labor, and results in a condition of things in which 931 persons out of every 1,000 die "without property worth speaking of" (Mulhall's "Dictionary of Statistics," from Probate Duty Returns, p. 279). But if capitalist monopoly of the wealth-material be compatible with private property, why should not collective monopoly of the wealth-material be equally compatible therewith? In neither case does the laborer individually own it, but in the present system it is owned by a class; under the proposed system it would be owned by the community, and part of the laborer's produce would go to the community, and he, as one of the community, would benefit by the utilisation of this collective wealth.

Mr. Bradlaugh is technically right in saying that my statement that capital "under our present industrial system is the result of unpaid labor" is too sweeping; I should have said, "capital, with trifling exceptions, is," etc. Taking Mr. Mulhall's figures, which are somewhat higher than Mr. Bradlaugh's, of the total capital of savings in trade societies, savings banks, and societies of every sort, we find it put at £156,000,000. This gives less than £6 per head to the members of the manual labor class, and this only on the incorrect assumption that all money in savings banks, etc., is put in by them. But everyone knows that, to take but one example, the savings banks are largely used by small gentry, shopkeepers, governesses, etc., and not exclusively by the manual labor class. In speaking of "capital under our present industrial system," I was thinking of capital in the bulk, rather than of the small savings made by some lucky workers. If the tailor and the others make "a profit," that is if they get out of the laborer more than the fair equivalent of the labor they have given in making or preparing their wares for his use, then the profit, being taken from the laborer without equivalent, is a confiscation of part of the results of his labor. As a matter of fact few working tailors, etc., do more than earn subsistence by their own labor; the capital is made by the tailor and others who employ wage-laborers, and who, by taking from each a little more than is returned to him as wage, *i.e.*, by not paying for all the labor, gradually or rapidly accumulate capital.

To the last paragraph, I do not think answer is needed. As Mr. Bradlaugh very fairly says, I analysed the facts on p. 15 [of my pamphlet]. I did not think it necessary to restate them on p. 16, in summarising the results as they bore on the question of Marx's three values.

I restate, in conclusion, my main objections to Mr. Bradlaugh's criticism of Socialism. He continually strikes at Utopian Socialism, not at Scientific. He never meets our main contention that private property in wealth-material must result theoretically in the servitude of the unpropertied class, and practically does so result in every ancient and modern society; that it enables the idle to live on the industrious, by

empowering them to charge the worker for the right to work; that it thus causes mischievous class distinctions, unjust confiscation resulting in labor without wealth. He does not show us how these hitherto inevitable results of private property in wealth-material can be prevented. But until this central citadel can be carried, I and thousands more must remain Socialists.

4. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, "Preface," *The History of Trade Unionism* (1894); new ed. (London, New York, and Bombay: Longmans, Green, 1902), xxv-xxxiv

[This pioneer husband-and-wife team were leading proponents and the first historians of the trade union movement in Britain. Although Sidney (1859-1947) and Beatrice (née Potter; 1858-1943) Webb knew and worked with Besant as fellow Fabian Socialists, they first learned about her through her independent efforts on the part of the match-girls, whose "victory turned a new leaf in Trade Union annals": "In July, 1888, ... the harsh treatment suffered by the women employed in making lucifer matches roused the burning indignation of Mrs. Besant, then editing *The Link*, a little weekly newspaper which had arisen out of the struggle for Trafalgar Square. A fiery leading article had the unexpected result of causing the match-girls to revolt; and 672 of them came out on strike. Without funds, without organisation, the struggle seemed hopeless. But by the indefatigable energy of Mrs. Besant and Mr. Herbert Burrows public opinion was aroused in a manner never before witnessed; £400 was subscribed by hundreds of sympathisers in all classes; and after a fortnight's obstinacy the employers were compelled, by sheer pressure of public feeling, to make some concessions to their workers" (*The History of Trade Unionism*, 388).

The Webbs begin their preface with an apology for their limited acknowledgement of the specific histories of the many thousands of trade societies. Producing a history of the general movement constitutes their immediate goal, and they hope that more specific studies will follow in subsequent volumes. As they explain, the history of trade unionism is intertwined with the history of Britain principally as it is being re-conceived by current historians in terms of the governed, not those who do the governing. As compilers of a "first" history, the authors intend to establish a collection methodology for those who will succeed them, and thus they will be explicit about the nature of their research and sources. They particularly recognize the historical value of trade union periodicals, which were not being put on deposit at the British Library, and hence they have had to scour the "field" themselves. Fortunately, almost all files, some going back to the eighteenth century, have been made available, and this preface serves as an occasion to acknowledge the courtesy and assistance rendered to them, even by industrial employers who seldom knew much about their own employees; mid-level managers (often former workmen) were the most

helpful in providing constructive critiques, but they were frequently hard to reach.

In many respects, the Webbs can be viewed as early sociologists, utilizing records they realized might not survive for future historians to study, and therefore they had to become "collectors" themselves. Eight years later, when they issued their "New Edition" of this groundbreaking volume, they announced that they had donated their own "very large collection" of printed matter and manuscripts on wages, employment conditions, and industrial organization to the British Library of Political Science, affiliated with the London School of Economics and Political Science (1902 "Preface," xxiv). Their collaborative working relationship serves as a model of co-operative methodology across the board. For further information and follow-up to references in the 1894 preface, see the appendices, bibliography, and index to both of their editions, as well as Beatrice Webb's own two autobiographies, *My Apprenticeship* (London: Longmans, Green, 1926) and *Our Partnership* (London: Longmans, Green, 1948).]

It is not our intention to delay the reader here by a conventional preface. As everyone knows, the preface is never written until the story is finished; and this story will not be finished in our time, or for many generations after us. A word or two as to our method of work and its results is all that we need say before getting to our main business.

Though we undertook the study of the Trade Union movement, not to prove any proposition of our own, but to discover what problems it had to present to us, our minds were not so blank on the subject that we had no preconception of the character of these problems. We thought they would almost certainly be economic, pointing a common economic moral; and that expectation still seems to us so natural, that if it had been fulfilled we should have accepted its fulfilment without comment. But it was not so. Our researches were no sooner fairly in hand than we began to discover that the effects of Trade Unionism upon the condition of labour, and upon industrial organization and progress, are so governed by the infinite technical variety of our productive processes, that they vary from industry to industry and even from trade to trade; and the economic moral varies with them. Where we expected to find an economic thread for a treatise, we found a spider's web; and from that moment we recognized that what we had first to write was not a treatise, but a history. And we saw that even a history would be impossible to follow unless we separated the general history of the whole movement from the particular histories of thousands of trade societies, some of which have maintained a continuous existence from the last century, whilst others have cropped up, run their brief course, and disappeared. Thus, when we had finished our labour of investigating the records of practically every important trade society from one end of the kingdom to the other, and accumulated piles of extracts, classified under endless trades and subdivisions of

trades, we found that we must exclude from the first volume all but a small selection from those documents which appeared to us most significant with regard to the development of the general movement. Many famous strikes and lock-outs, many interesting trade disputes, many sensational prosecutions, and some furious outbursts of riot and crime, together with many direr matters relating to particular trades, have had either to be altogether omitted from our narrative, or else accorded a strictly subordinate reference in their relation to the history of Trade Unionism as a whole. All analysis of the economic effects of Trade Union action we reserve for a subsequent volume on the Problems of Trade Unionism, for which we shall draw more fully from the annals of the separate unions. And in that volume the most exacting seeker for economic morals will be more than satisfied; for there will be almost as many economic morals drawn as societies described.

That history of the general movement, to which we have confined ourselves here, will be found to be part of the political history of England. In spite of all the pleas of modern historians for less history of the actions of governments, and more descriptions of the manners and customs of the governed, it remains true that history, however it may relieve and enliven itself with descriptions of the manners and morals of the people, must, if it is to be history at all, follow the course of continuous organizations. The history of a perfectly democratic State would be at once the history of a government and of a people. The history of Trade Unionism is the history of a State within our State, and one so jealously democratic that to know it well is to know the English working man as no reader of middle-class histories can know him. From the early years of the eighteenth century down to the present day, Democracy, Freedom of Association, *Laissez-faire* [sic], Regulation of the Hours and Wages of Labour, Co-operative Production, Free Trade, Protection, and many other distinct and often contradictory political ideals, have from time to time seized the imagination of the organized wage-earners and made their mark on the course of the Trade Union movement. And, since 1867 at least, wherever the ideals have left their mark on Trade Unionism, Trade Unionism has left its mark on politics. We shall be able to show that some of those overthrows of our party governments which have caused most surprise in the middle and upper classes, and for which the most far-fetched reasons have been given by them and their journalists and historians after the event, carry their explanation on the surface for anyone who knows what the Trade Unionists of the period were thinking. Such demonstrations, however, will be purely incidental, as we have written throughout of Trade Unionism for its own sake, and not for that of the innumerable sidelights which it throws on party politics.

In our concluding chapter, which we should perhaps offer as an appendix rather than as part of the regular plan of the volume, we have attempted to give a bird's-eye view of the Trade Union world of to-day, with its unequal distribution, its strong sectional organization and

defective political machinery, its new governing class of trade officials—above all, its present state of transition in methods, aims and policy, in the face of the multitude of unsettled constitutional, economic, and political problems with which it stands confronted.

A few words upon the work of collecting materials for our work may prove useful to those who may hereafter come to reap in the same field. In the absence of any exhaustive treatment of any period of Trade Union history we have to rely mainly upon our own investigations. But every student of the subject must acknowledge the value of Dr. Brentano's fertile researches into English working-class history, and of Mr. George Howell's thoroughly practical exposition of the Trade Unionism of his own school and his own time. Perhaps the most important published material on the subject is the *Report on Trade Societies and Strikes* issued by the Social Science Association in 1860, a compact storehouse of carefully sifted facts which compares favorably with the enormous bulk of scrappy and unverified information collected by the five historic official inquiries into Trade Unionism between 1824 and 1894. We have, moreover, found a great many miscellaneous facts about Trade Unions in periodical literature and ephemeral pamphlets in the various public libraries all over the country. To facilitate the work of future students we append to this volume a complete list of such published materials as we have been able to discover. For the early history of combinations we have had to rely upon the public records, old newspapers, and miscellaneous contemporary pamphlets. Thus, our first two chapters are principally based upon the journals of the House of Commons, the minutes of the Privy Council, the publications of the Record Office, and the innumerable broadsheet petitions to Parliament and old tracts relating to Trade which have been preserved in the British Museum, the Guildhall Library, and the invaluable collection of economic literature made by Professor H.S. Foxwell, St. John's College, Cambridge. Most important of all, for the period prior to 1835, are the many volumes of manuscript commentaries, newspaper cuttings, rules, reports, pamphlets, etc., left by Francis Place, and now in the British Museum. This unique collection, formed by the busiest politician of his time, is indispensable, not only to the student of working-class movements, but also to any historian of English political or social life during the first forty years of the century. [Authors' Note: Place's *Letter Books*, together with an unpublished autobiography, preserved by his family, are now in the custody of Mr. Graham Wallas, who is preparing a critical biography of this great reformer, which will throw much new light on all the social and political events of English history between 1798 and 1840.]

But the greater part of our material, especially that relating to the present century, has come from the Trade Unionists themselves. The offices of the older unions contain interesting archives, sometimes reaching back to the eighteenth century—minute-books in which generations of diligent, if unlettered, secretaries, the true historians of a

great movement, have struggled to record the doings of their committees, and files of Trade Union periodicals, ignored even by the British Museum, through which the plans and aspirations of ardent working-class politicians and administrators have been expounded month by month to the scattered branches of their organizations. We were assured at the outset of our investigation that no outsider would be allowed access to the inner history of some of the old-fashioned societies. But we have found this prevalent impression as to the jealous secrecy of the Trade Unions without justification. The secretaries of old branches or ancient local societies have rummaged for us their archaic chests with three locks, dating from the eighteenth century. The surviving leaders of a bygone Trade Unionism have ransacked their drawers to find for our use the rules and minutes of their long-forgotten societies. In many a working man's home in London and Liverpool, Newcastle and Dublin—above all, in Glasgow and Manchester—the descendants of the old skilled handicraftsmen have unearthed “grandfather's indentures,” or “father's old card,” or a tattered set of rules, to help forward the investigation of a stranger whom they dimly recognized as striving to record the annals of their class. The whole of the documents in the offices of the great National and County Unions have been most generously placed at our disposal, from the printed reports and sets of rules to the private cash accounts and executive minute books. In only one case has a General Secretary refused us access to the old books of his society, and then simply on the ground that he was himself proposing to write its history, and regarded us as rivals in the literary field.

Nor has this generous confidence been confined to the musty records of the past. In the long sojourns at the various industrial centres which this examination of local archives has necessitated, every facility has been afforded to us for studying the actual work of the Trade Union organization of to-day. We have attended the sittings of the Trades Councils in most of the large towns; we have sat through numerous branch and members' meetings all over the country; and one of us has even enjoyed the exceptional privilege of being present at the private deliberations of the Executive Committees of various national societies, as well as at the special delegate meetings summoned by the great federal unions of Cotton-spinners, Cotton-weavers and Coalminers for the settlement of momentous issues of trade policy, and at the six weeks' sessions in 1892 in which sixty chosen delegates of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers overhauled the trade policy and internal administration of that world-wide organization.

We have naturally not confined ourselves to the workmen's side of the case. In almost every industrial centre we have sought out representative employers in the different industries. From them we have received many useful hints and criticisms. But, as might have been expected, the great captains of industry are, for the most part, absorbed in the commercial side of their business, and are seldom accurately acquainted with the details of the past, or even of the

present, organization of their workmen. Of more assistance in our task have been the secretaries of the various employers' associations. Especially in the shipbuilding ports have these gentlemen placed at our disposal their experience in collective negotiation with the different sections of labour, and the private statistics compiled by their associations. But of all the employing class we have found the working managers and foremen, who have themselves often been workmen, the best informed and most suggestive critics of Trade Union organization and methods. We have often regretted that precisely this class is the most difficult of access to the investigator of industrial problems, and the least often called as witnesses before Royal Commissions.

The difficulty of welding into narrative form the innumerable details of the thousands of distinct organizations, and of constructing out of their separate chronicles anything like a history of the general movement, has, we need hardly say, been very great. We are painfully aware of the shortcomings of our work, both from a literary and from a historical point of view. We have been encouraged in our task by the conviction—strengthened as our investigation proceeded—that the Trade Union records contain material of the utmost value to the future historian of industrial and political organization, and that these records are fast disappearing. Many of the older archives are in the possession of individual workmen, who are insensible of their historical value. Among the larger societies it is not uncommon to find only one complete set of rules, reports, circulars, etc., in existence. A fire, a removal to new premises, or the death of an old secretary frequently results in the disappearance of everything not actually in daily office use. The keen investigator or collector will appreciate the extremity of the vexation with which we have learnt, on arriving at an ancient Trade Union centre, that the “old rubbish” of the office had been “cleared out” six months before. The local public libraries, and even the British Museum, seldom contain any of the internal Trade Union records new or old. We have therefore not only collected every Trade Union document that we could acquire, but we have made lengthy extracts from, and abstracts of, the piles of minute-books, reports, rules, circulars, pamphlets, working-class newspapers, etc., which have been lent to us.

[The remaining three paragraphs of the 1894 preface are devoted to acknowledging “the most cordial assistance from all quarters” that the authors received over the course of “the wide scope of the investigation itself.” Particular thanks are rendered to R.A. Peddie for his preparation of the extensive bibliography (pp. 499-583) derived from their vast holdings.]

Appendix D: Concurrent Issues as Seen by Annie Besant

1. Annie Besant, *The Political Status of Women* (London: The National Secular Society, 1874)

[This pamphlet reproduces the text of Besant's first official lecture offered under the sponsorship of the National Secular Society, and it speaks clearly to her long-standing support of women's rights. I have reprinted it in its entirety to provide a record of how its points build sequentially as well as to give the reader an opportunity to gauge the tone of a debater who is not just trying to win her argument but who also wants to persuade the reader/listener to come over to her side. Reportedly Bradlaugh told his daughter Hypatia that it was the best speech he had ever heard ("Personal Reminiscences," Bradlaugh Family Papers). Coming just a few years after Besant's first unofficial lecture delivered to the empty pews of Sibsey Church, this written text already demonstrates the cadences of a practiced speaker. The topic looks ahead to many of her later speeches and publications supporting women's rights, notably her concern for educational reform in *Education of Indian Girls* (1904) and her speech at Albert Hall on behalf of women's suffrage, "A Question of Humanity," republished in the journal *Votes for Women* (23 June 1911).

Besant immediately dismisses the petty, ephemeral party politics currently at play on the issue in Britain. She writes very much in the tradition of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), and like Wollstonecraft she comes to her topic well-informed about the history of male suffrage as well. Besant addresses multiple audiences in this piece—"you" are mostly men, including some anti-suffrage women by implication; "we" denotes herself as the woman writer/speaker united with all women; while "friends" consist of the larger (eventual) body of supportive men and women. Although occasionally falling back on essentialist arguments herself, she takes her opponents to task for their essentialism, using quotations from John Stuart Mill's recently published *Subjection of Women* (1869) to help her stay on task. It is worth noting that Besant is writing a full quarter of a century before women's suffrage was regularly taken to the streets and platforms. Early on, she aligns herself with working men in general, most of whom have known only a decade's representation since the passage of the Suffrage Act of 1867.

Suffrage emerges from this treatise as one in a series of necessary reforms, many of which have already been enacted, even if not necessarily fully endorsed by Parliament. At this point, Besant's own trial for custody of her daughter is four years in the offing; the gains of the

Married Women's Property Act of 1882 remain on the horizon (see Appendix C); and the dominant mindset has not yet been challenged by Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1889). Alternately Besant shames her readership by comparing the status of women in Britain with that of those in so-called "despotic" lands, and then she appeals to her readers' intelligence, their better selves, their sense of justice. Ultimately, she invokes the idealism of a co-operative future, when each gender can help to raise the other. Even this early on in her career, Besant prefigures her final resting place within the peace and evolutionary zenith promised by Theosophy in her final injunction, "As perfect music unto noble words" (Alfred Tennyson, *The Princess*, Book VII).]

Various arguments are advanced by the opponents of woman suffrage, which require to be met by those who maintain that the political status of women should be the same as the political status of men. Of these the principal—apart from party arguments, such as those which regard the momentary strengthening of Tory, Whig, or Radical, by the female vote—are as follows:—

Why should the political incompetency of women receive so much attention when more pressing wrongs require a remedy?

Women are naturally unfit for the proper exercise of the franchise.

They are indifferent about the matter.

They are sufficiently represented as it is.

Political power would withdraw them from their proper sphere, and would be a source of domestic annoyance.

It can scarcely be necessary for me to clear my way by proving to you that there are such things as *rights*. "Every great truth," it has been said, "must travel through three stages of public opinion: men will say of it, first, that it is not true; secondly, that it is contrary to religion; lastly, that everyone knew it already." The "rights of man" have battled through these first two stages, and have reached the third; they have been denounced as a lie, subversive of all government; they have been anathematised as a heresy, to be abhorred of all faithful Christians; but now every one has always known that men have rights, it is a perfect truism. These rights do not rest on the charter of a higher authority; they are not privileges held at the favour of a superior; they have their root in the nature of man; they are his by "divine"—that is to say, by *natural*—right. Kings, presidents, governments, draw their authority from the will of the people; the people draw their authority from themselves.

It is quite a new light to the general public that women have any rights at all; duties? ay, plenty of them, with sharp penalties for their non-fulfilment. Wrongs? ay, plenty of them, too—wrongs which will not be borne much longer. Privileges? yes, if we will take them as privileges, and own that we hold them at the will of our masters; but *rights*? The assertion was at first met with laughter that was only not indignant, because it was too contemptuous. Our truth is as yet in its

infancy—first, it is not true; secondly, it is contrary to religion. The matter is taken a little more seriously now; men begin to fancy that these absurd women are really in earnest, and they condescend to use a little argument, and to administer a little “soothing syrup” to these fractious children. Gentle remonstrance takes the place of laughter, and thus we arrive at my first head—surely there are more pressing female wrongs to attend to than the question of political incapacity.

It is perfectly true that the want of representation in Parliament is not, *in itself*, a grave injury. In itself, I say, it is of secondary importance; its gravity consists in what it involves. You do not value money for its own sake—those little yellow counters are not intrinsically beautiful, nor are they in themselves worth toil, and trouble, and danger; but you value them for what they represent; and thus we value a vote, as means to an end. In a free country, a vote means power. When a man is a voter, his wishes must be taken into consideration; he counts as one in an election—his opinion influences the return. When the working-classes wished to alter laws which pressed hardly on them, they agitated for Parliamentary reform. What folly! what waste of time! what throwing away of strength and energy! how unpractical! Why agitate for an extension of the franchise, when so many social burdens required to be lightened? Why? Because they knew that when they won the franchise they could trust to themselves to remedy these social anomalies—when they had votes, they could make these questions the test of the fitness or unfitness of a candidate for Parliament. Non-voters, they could only *ask* for reform; voters, they could *command* it. And this is the answer of women to those who urge on them that they should turn their attention to practical matters, and leave off this agitation about the franchise. We shall do nothing so foolish. True, certain laws press hardly on us; but we are not going now to agitate for the repeal of these laws one by one. We might agitate for a very long time before we gained attention. We prefer going to the root of the matter at once. We will win the right of representation in Parliament, and when we have won that, *these laws will be altered*. Ten years after women become voters, there will be some erasures in the Statute Book. There will no longer be a law that women, on marriage, become paupers, unless steps are taken beforehand to prevent it; marriage will have ceased to bring with it these disabilities. There will no longer be a law which gives to the father despotic authority over the fate of the child from the mother’s arms, and give it into the charge of some other woman; which makes even the dead father able to withhold the child from the living mother. There will no longer be a law which sanctions the consignment of thousands of women to misery and despair, in order that men’s lives may be made more safely luxurious, and their homes, when they choose to make them, kept more pure. The laws whose action is more and more driving women (in the large towns especially) to prefer unlegalised marriages to the bonds of legal matrimony, will have vanished, to the purifying of society and the increased happiness of both men and women. The possession of a vote, by giving

women a share in the power of the State, will also make them more respected. Hitherto, law, declaring women to be weak, has carefully put all advantages into the hands of those who are already the powerful. Instead of guarding and strengthening the feeble, it has bound them hand and foot, and laid them helpless at the feet of the strong. To him that hath, it has indeed been given; and from her that hath not, has been taken away even the protection she might have had.

“Women are naturally unfit for the proper exercise of the franchise.”

It has been remarked, more than once, that, in this contest about the voting of women, men and women have exchanged their characteristics. Women appeal to reason, men to instincts; women rely on logic, men on assumptions; women are swayed by facts, men by prejudices. To all our arguments, to all our reasoning, men answer, “It is unfeminine—it is contrary to nature.” If we press them, How and why? we are only met with a re-assertion of the maxim. I am afraid that we women sadly lack the power of seeing differences. It is unfeminine to be a doctor, but feminine to be a nurse. It is unfeminine to mix drugs, but feminine to administer them. It is unfeminine to study political economy, but feminine to train the future Statesmen. It is unfeminine to study sanitary laws, but feminine to regulate the atmosphere of the nursery, whose wholesomeness depends on those laws. It is unfeminine to mingle with men at the polling-booth, but feminine to labour among them in the field and factories. In a word, it is unfeminine to know how to do a thing, and to do it comprehendingly, wisely, and well; it is feminine to do things of whose laws and principles we know absolutely nothing, and to do them ignorantly, foolishly, and badly. We do not see things in this light. I suppose it is because we, as women, have “the poetical power of seeing resemblances,” but lack the “philosophical power of seeing differences.” We must, however, analyse this natural inferiority of women; it is shown, we are told, in their mental weakness, their susceptibility to influence, their unbusiness-like habits. If this natural mental inferiority of woman be a fact, one cannot but wonder how nature has managed to make so many mistakes. Mary Somerville, Mrs. Lewis [sic] (better known as George Eliot), Frances Power Cobbe, Harriet Martineau, were made, I suppose when nature was asleep. They certainly show no signs of the properly-constituted feminine intellect. But, allowing that these women *are* inferior in mental power to the uneducated artisan and petty farmer, may I ask why that should be a *political* disqualification? I never remember hearing it urged that the franchise should only be conferred on men of genius, or of great intellectual attainments. Even the idea of an education franchise was sneered at, low as was the proposed standard of education. When a law is made which restricts the franchise to those who rise above a certain mental level, the talk about mental inferiority will become reasonable and pertinent; but, when that law is passed, I fear that nature will not be found to have been sufficiently careful of the male interest to have placed all men above the level, and all women below it. Susceptibility to influence is an argument that also goes too far. I am

afraid that many people's opinions are but rarely "opinions" at all. They are simply their neighbours' thoughts covered over with a film of personal prejudice. It is, however, a new idea in England that a class liable to be unduly influenced should be disfranchised; the Ballot Act lately passed was, I always understood, specially designed to protect the weak from the pressure of the strong. Oliver Cromwell said that it was unjust to deprive any one of a natural right on the plea that, were it given, it would be abused. Not so; "when he hath abused it, judge." Business incapacity may, or may not exist on the part of women; it is difficult to judge what power a person may have when he is never permitted to exercise it. Tie up a man's hands, and then sneer that he has no aptitude for writing; or chain his feet, and show his natural incapacity for walking. John Stuart Mill has remarked: "The ladies of reigning families are the only women who are allowed the same range of interests and freedom of development as men, and it is precisely in their case that there is not found to be any inferiority. Exactly where and in proportion as woman's capacities for government have been tried, in that proportion have they been found adequate." In France, at the present day, the women rule business matters more than do the men, and the business capacity of French-women is a matter of notoriety. Lastly, I would urge on those who believe in women's *natural* inferiority, why, in the name of common sense, are you so terribly afraid of putting your theory to the proof? Open to women the learned professions; unlock the gates which bar her out from your mental strifes; give her no favour, no special advantages; let her race you on even terms. She *must* fail, if nature be against her; she *must* be beaten, if nature has incapacitated her for the struggle. Why do you fear to let her challenge you, if she is weighted not only with the transmitted effects of long centuries of inferiority, but is also bound with nature's iron chain? Try. If you are so sure about nature's verdict, do not fear her arbitration; but if you shrink from our rivalry, we *must* believe that you feel our equality, and, to cover your own doubts of your superiority, you prattle about our feebleness.

"Women are indifferent about the possession of the franchise." If this is altogether true, it is very odd that there should be so much agitation going on upon the subject. But I am quite willing to grant that the mass of women are indifferent about the matter. Alas! it has always been so. Those who stand up to champion an oppressed class do not look for gratitude from those for whom they labour. It is the bitterest curse of oppression that it crushes out in the breast of the oppressed the very wish to be free. A man once spent long years in the Bastille; shut up in his youth, old age found him still in his dungeon. The people assailed the prison, and, among others, this prisoner was set free; but the sunshine was agony to the eyes long accustomed to the darkness, and the fresh stir of life was as thunder to the ears accustomed to the silence of the dungeon; the prisoner pleaded to be kept a prisoner still. Was his action a proof that freedom is not fair? The slaves, after generations of bondage, were willing to remain slaves where their masters were kind and good. Is

this a proof that liberty is not the birthright of a man? And this rule holds good in all, and not only in the extreme cases I have cited. Habit, custom, make hard things easy. If a woman is educated to regard man as her natural lord, she will do so. If the man to whom her lot falls is kind to her, she will be contented; if he is unkind, she will be unhappy; but, unless she be an exceptional character, she will not think of resistance. But women *are* now beginning to think of resistance; a deep, low, murmuring is going on, suppressed as yet, but daily growing in intensity; and such a murmur has always been the herald of revolt. Further, do men think of what they are doing when they taunt the present agitators with the indifference shown by women? They are, in effect, telling us that, if we are in earnest in this matter, we must *force* it on their attention; we must agitate till every home in England rings with the subject; we must agitate till mass meetings in every town compel them to hear us; we must agitate till every woman has our arguments at her fingers' ends. Ah! you are not wise to throw in our teeth the indifference of women. You are stinging us into a determination that this indifference shall not last; you are nerving us to a struggle which will be fiercer than you dream; you are forcing us into an agitation which will convulse the State. You dare to make indifference a plea for justice? Very well; then the indifference shall soon be a thing of the past. You have as yet the frivolous, the childish, the thoughtless, on your side; but the cream of womanhood is against you. We will educate women to reason and to think, and then the mass will only want a leader.

"Women are sufficiently represented as it is." By whom? *by those whose interest lie in keeping them in subjection.* So the masters told the workmen: "*We* represent you; *we* take care of your interests." The workmen answered: "We prefer to represent ourselves; we like to have our interests guarded by our own hands." And such is our answer to our "representatives." We don't agree with some of your views; we don't like some of your laws; we object to some of your theories for us. You do not really represent *us* at all; what you represent is your own interests, which, in many cases, touch ours. The laws you pass are passed in the interests of men, and not of women; and naturally so, for you are made legislators by men, and not by women. There are few cases where men are really the representatives of women. John Stuart Mill—now dead, alas!—noblest and most candid of philosophers and Statesmen; Professor Fawcett, a future leader; Jacob Bright, our steadfast friend: these, and a few others, might fairly be called representatives of women in Parliament. Outside the House, too, we have a few gallant champions, pre-eminent among whom is Moncure Conway, whose voice is always raised on the side of freedom and justice. But what we demand is the right to choose our own representatives, so that our voice may have its share in making the laws which we are bound to obey. We share the duty of supporting the State, and we claim the right of helping to guide it. Taxation and representation run side by side, and if you will not allow us to be represented, you have no right to tax us. I may suggest here, in reference

to the contest about married women having votes, that this point is altogether foreign to the discussion. The *right* to vote and the *qualification* for a vote, are two distinct things, and come under different laws. The one is settled by Act of Parliament, the other by the revising barrister. A blunder was lately made by putting into a Bill a special disqualification of married women. Such a clause is absurdly out of place. We are contending to remove from a whole sex a legal disability; the details come later, and must be arranged when the principle is secured. A man has the right to vote because he is a man; but he must possess certain qualifications before he can exercise his right. Let womanhood, as such, cease to be a disqualification; that is the main point. Let the discussion of qualifications follow. Further, if it be urged that women are represented by their husbands, what are we to say about those who have none? In 1861, fifteen years ago, there were three and a half millions of women in England working for their livelihood—two and a half millions of these were unmarried, and were, therefore, unrepresented. Is there no pathos in these figures? Two and a half millions struggling honestly to live, but mute to tell of their wants or their wrongs. Mute, I say, for not one in a thousand has the power of the pen. And this is not the worst. Oh, friends! below these, pressed down there by the terrible struggle for existence, there is a lower depth yet, tenanted by thousands of whom it is not here my province to speak, thousands, from whom a bitter wail goes up, to which men's ears are deaf. Surely, women need representation—surely, there are grievances and wrongs of women which can only be done away by those whom women send to Parliament as their representatives. It is natural that men should not desire that many of these laws should be altered. In the first place, it is impossible they should understand how hardly they press on women; only those who wear it, says the proverb, “know where the shoe pinches.” And, in the second place, the holders of a monopoly generally object to have their monopoly interfered with. They can't imagine what in the world these outsiders want pressing in upon their social domains. The nobleman cannot understand why the peasant should object to the Game Laws; it *is* so unreasonable of him. The farmer cannot make out why the labourer should not attend quietly to his hedging and ditching, instead of making all this fuss about a union. The capitalist cannot see the sense of the artisan banding himself with his brethren, instead of going on with his duty and working hard. Men can't conceive why women do not attend to their household duties instead of fussing about Parliament. Unfortunately, each of these tiresome classes cares very little whether those to whom they are opposed can or cannot understand *why* they agitate. We may be told continually that we are sufficiently represented; we say that we do *not* think so, but that we mean to be.

“Political power would withdraw women from their proper sphere, and would be a source of domestic annoyance.” Their proper sphere—*i.e.*, the home. This allegation is a very odd one. Men are lawyers, doctors, merchants; every hour of the day is pledged, engrossing specu-

lations stretch the brain, deep questions absorb the mind, great ideas swell in the intellect. Yet men vote. If occupation be a fatal disqualification, let us pass a law that only idle people shall have votes. You will withdraw workers from their various spheres of work, if you allow them to take an interest in politics. For heaven's sake, do not go and take the merchant from the desk, the doctor from the hospital, the lawyer from the court; you will disorganise society—you will withdraw the workers. Do you say it is not so—that the delivery of a vote takes up a very short time at considerable intervals? that a man must have some leisure, and may very well expend it, if he please, in studying politics: that a change of thought is very good for the weary brain? that the alteration of employment is a positive and most valuable relaxation? You are quite right; outside interests are healthy, and prevent private affairs from becoming morbidly engrossing. The study of large problems checks the natural tendency to be absorbed in narrower questions. A man is stronger, healthier, nobler, when in working hard in trade or in profession for his home, he does not forget he is a citizen of a mighty nation. I can think of few things more likely to do women real good than anything which would urge them to extend their interests beyond the narrow circle of their homes. Why, men complain that women are bigoted, narrow-minded, prejudiced, impracticable. Wider interests would do much to remedy these defects. If you want your wife to be your toy, or your drudge, you do perhaps wisely in shutting up her ideas within the four walls of your house; but if you want one who will stand at your side through life, in evil report as well as in good, a strong, large-hearted woman, fit to be your comfort in trouble, your counsellor in difficulty, your support in danger, worthy to be the mother of your children, the wise guardian and trainer of your sons and your daughters, then seek to widen women's intellects, and to enlarge their hearts, by sharing with them your grander plans of life, your deeper thoughts, your keener hopes. Do not keep your brains and intellects for the strife of politics and the conflicts for success, and give to your homes and to your wives nothing but your condescending carelessness and your thoughtless love. Further, do you look on women as your natural enemies, and suppose they are on the look out for every chance of running away from their homes and their children? It says very little for you if you hope only to keep women's hearts by chaining their minds, or limiting their range of action. What is it really worth, this compelled submission—this enforced devotion? Do you acknowledge that you make home-life so dull, so wearisome, that you dare not throw open the cage-door, lest the captive should escape? Do you confess that your service is so hard a one that she you call your friend is only longing to be free? You do yourselves an injustice, friends; you shame your own characters—you discredit your homes. A happy home, the centre of hopes and fears, the cherished resting-place from life's troubles, the sure haven from life's conflicts, the paradise brightened by children's prattle and children's laughter—this home is not a place where women must be chained down lest they

should run away. Admitting, however, for argument's sake, the absurd idea that women would neglect their homes if they possessed the franchise, may I ask by what right men restrict women's action to the home? I can understand that, in Eastern lands, where the husband rules his wives with despotic authority, and woman is but the plaything and the slave of man, woman's sphere *is* the home, for the very simple reason that she cannot get outside it. So, in this sense, in the Zoological Gardens, is the den the sphere of the lion, and the cage of the eagle. Shut any living creature up, and its prison becomes its sphere. But if the prisoner becomes restless—if nature beats strongly at the captive's heart—if he yearns for the free air and the golden sunshine, you may, indeed, keep him in the sphere you have built for him; but he will break his heart, and will die in your hands. Many women now, educated more highly than they used to be—women with strong brains and loving hearts—are being driven into bitterness and into angry opposition, because their ambition is thwarted at every step, and their eager longings for a fuller life are forced back and crushed. A tree *will* grow, however you may try to stunt it. You may disfigure it, you may force it into awkward shapes, but grow it will. One would fain hope that it is in thoughtlessness and in ignorance that men try to push women back. Surely they do not appreciate the injury they are doing, both to themselves and to women, if they turn their homes into prison-houses, and the little children into incumbances. In the strong, true woman there is a tender motherhood which weaker natures cannot reach; but if these women are to be told that domestic cares only are to fill their brains, and the prattle of children to be the only satisfaction of their intellect, you run a terrible risk of making them break free from home and child. Allow them to grow freely, to develop as nature bids them, and they will find room for home-cares in their minds, and the warmest nestling-place in their bosom will be the haven of the little child. But if you check, and fret, and carp at them, you will not succeed in keeping them back, but you will succeed in souring them, and in making them hard and bitter. Oh, for the sake of English home life—for the sake of the tender ties of motherhood—for the sake of the common happiness, do not turn into bitter opponents the women who are still anxious to be your friends and your fellow-workers. This is no imaginary danger; it is a thunder-cloud brooding over many English homes. I can scarcely believe that men and women would be so unreasonable as to make the power of voting into a domestic annoyance. Of course, if a married couple want to quarrel, there are sure to be plenty of differences of opinion between them which will give them the proper opportunity. But why should *political* disagreement be specially fatal to domestic peace? Theology is now a fruitful source of disagreement. If the husband is the free-thinker, he does not suffer, because he does not allow his wife to worry him too far; but if the free-thinking is on the side of the wife, matters are apt to become uncomfortable. There is only one way to remedy this difficulty. Let the husband feel, as the wife now does, that between two grown-up people control of one by the other is an

absurdity. Bitterness arises now from disagreement, because the wife who forms her opinion for herself is regarded as a rebel to lawful authority. Remove the authority, which is a tyranny, and people will readily "agree to differ." There will possibly be a little more care before marriage about the opinions of the lady wooed than there is now, when the man fancies that he can mould the docile girl into what shape he pleases, and the future happiness of both is marred if the woman happens to be made of bright steel, instead of plastic clay. In any case, Parliament is scarcely bound to treat one half of England with injustice, lest the other half should find its authority curtailed.

One by one I have faced the only arguments against the extension of the franchise to women with which I am acquainted. You yourselves must judge how far these arguments are valid, and on which side right and justice rest. I would add that I feel sure that, when the matter is fairly placed before them, most men will sympathise with, and assist our cause. Some noble and brave men have come forward to join our ranks already, and speak boldly for woman's cause, and work faithfully for its triumph. The mass of men only need to study our claims in order to accept them. They have been reared to regard themselves as our natural superiors; small blame to them that they take the upper seats. Kind and gentle as many of them are, working hard for wife and children, thinking much of women and loving them well, it cannot be expected that they should readily understand that their relations to the weaker sex are founded on an injustice. But if they want to see how false is their idea of peace, and how misled they are when they think women's position satisfactory, let them go out and see what the laws are where the power they give is wielded by brutality and tyranny. Let them try to imagine what women suffer who are too weak and timid to resist the strength under whose remorseless exercise they writhe in vain; let them try to appreciate the sharper agony of those whose bolder hearts and stronger natures defy their tyrants, and break, at whatever cost, their chains. Laws must be tested by their working; these laws which make the woman the helpless servant of man are not enforced in happy homes; but they exist, and elsewhere they are used.

Injustice is never good; it is never even safe. There is a higher life before us, a nobler ideal of marriage union, a fairer development of individual natures, a surer hope of wider happiness. Liberty for every human being, equality before the law for all in public and in private, fraternity of men and women in peaceful friendship, these are the promise of the dawning day. Co-workers in every noble labour, co-partners in every righteous project, co-soldiers in every just cause, men and women in the time to come shall labour, think, and struggle side by side. The man shall bring his greater strength and more sustained determination, the woman her quicker judgment and purer heart, till man shall grow tenderer, and woman stronger, man more pure, and woman more brave and free. Till at last, generations hence, the race shall develop into a strength and a beauty at present unimagined, and

men and women shall walk this fair earth hand-in-hand, diverse, yet truly one, set each to each—

“As perfect music unto noble words.”

2. From *The Secular Song and Hymn Book*, Issued by Authority of the National Secular Society (London: C. Watts, [1875]), including Hymn 32, and the text of her “Burial Service,” in Annie Besant and Austin Holyoake, “Two Secular Burial Services” (London: National Secular Society, [1875])

a. Annie Besant, “Preface,” *The Secular Song and Hymn Book*, iii-v

[As Besant makes clear in her preface, this compilation was created in response to a demand that the central organization of the National Secular Society provide such a publication for its constituents; it has the stamp of approval of the NSS president and executive committee, and it sold at the very reasonable price of one shilling. Apparently no volume of musical accompaniment followed this publication, but Besant points to the ready availability of *Hymns Ancient and Modern for Use in the Services of the Church*. “Compiled and arranged under the musical editorship of William Henry Monk” (1823-89), this collection was published by William Clowes and Sons of London; Besant is probably referring to Monk’s revised and enlarged edition of 1875, but the hymnal continued to be published well into the twentieth century. On paper, her song and hymn book is essentially a volume of poetry; other authors of note featured multiple times in the anthology include Shelley, Emerson, Longfellow, Whittier, and Swinburne, with radical poet Ebenezer Elliott topping the list. As editor, Besant announces and displays responsible editing practices, particularly with respect to obtaining proper permissions, and she bemoans the greed of Adelaide Procter’s publishers, Bell and Daldy, whose copyright charges limited her selection to a single poem by Procter, “One by One the Sands Are Flowing.” A second edition appearing within the year, the continuity of the two editions guaranteed their usefulness, and solid sales for both editions spoke to the strong desire for ceremony and aesthetics on the part of Secularists. One other Freethought publication of this ilk was still in print, edited by Charles Watts and Austin Holyoake, while a second was being contemporaneously prepared by George Reddalls for the Manchester Branch. Note: for “Republican,” today we would read “democratic.”]

This Song and Hymn Book is issued in answer to the requests of Secular Societies throughout the country, that the National would provide such a work for the use of the Party. It is, throughout, Republican and Atheistic, thus bearing the two-fold stamp of our movement. The absence of music

is a great imperfection; but the expense of printing music is very large, and we did not think that the sale would, as yet, be sufficient to cover the additional outlay. We hope, at some future time, to remedy this defect. Meanwhile, as a temporary expedient, we have taken "Hymns Ancient and Modern" as a tune-book, and the numbers attached to the hymns on the left-hand side refer to suitable melodies in that popular Christian hymnal; in many cases we have given the names of well-known songs, which suit the words. Here and there some slight adaptation is necessary, as in No. XVII., which goes to "The Men of Harlech"; the musical taste of the Societies will find out the necessary alterations. Some trouble has been taken to add the authors' names to their compositions, and to print the words as they were originally written. Where slight changes have been necessary, they have been made; but all such changes are printed in italics, in order to acknowledge where such liberties have been taken with the original. We have to thank various authors and publishers for their generous courtesy in allowing us to reprint copyright poems. Our request has been met with instant and willing permission, with one exception, in which a charge was made for the privilege; this charge has prevented us from laying before our readers as many of Miss Procter's poems as we should other wise have done. If in any case we have unknowingly infringed any copyright, it has been done in ignorance, and we must ask the forgiveness of the injured party. One special acknowledgment we are bound to make; many of the most spirited lyrics are reprinted from the *English Republic*, edited by W.J. Linton, a journal which, unfortunately, has ceased to exist; we have reprinted these without permission, not knowing where to seek it, and confident that the bond of Republican brotherhood will make their authors rejoice thus to further the common cause. The Special Poems at the end will, we hope, be useful to Societies; and some of them are inserted with the idea that they may help towards forming a Secular Calendar, to commemorate our mighty dead. We have endeavoured to select such songs as may be worthy of the Party both in thought and in expression, such as may serve at once to inspire and to culture. One or two have been admitted in which the second requisite is somewhat wanting, because, in spite of their imperfection as poems, they had become loved by the friends who had sung them for long. Very earnestly do we hope that this book may help in introducing music at many of our meetings, and may be found serviceable where music is already sedulously cultivated. It has Mr. Bradlaugh's warm approval, as President, and is sanctioned by the National Executive.

b. Lyrics attributed to Besant in *The Secular Song and Hymn Book*, 31-32

[Besant designates her authorship of four poems or sets of lyrics in her edited collection. They are almost patriotic in tone, at least with respect to her public-spirited philosophy of political life, yet religious rhetoric and imagery remain present throughout. Hymn 32 (repro-

duced below) equates working to making oneself and others free with prayer, and it goes on to conjoin truth and martyrdom; her final exhortation to act in the face of overwhelming opposition encapsulates the Secularist credo Besant has wholeheartedly embraced. Disguised through its use of male pronouns, the poem in essence paints a self-portrait. This is the only set of Besant's lyrics that I have found reprinted elsewhere; it appears at the head of the third collected edition of her speeches and writings on the India question (1921), and its four stanzas are separately printed by Besterman in his Besant calendar under the categories "Religion and Morality," "Tolerance," "Truth," and "Law and Justice" (1927). Her other contributions include Hymn 88, entirely reminiscent of "La Marseillaise" in tone and content; Hymn 116, to be sung to the tune of "Hold the Fort," General Sherman's message of hope to besieged Union defenders; and Song 182, which appears in a final section called "Songs and Hymns for Special Occasions," this one fitting under the category of "Naming of Children."¹

Hymn 32:

Who pants and struggles to be free,
Who strives for others' liberty,
Who, failing, still works patiently,

He truly prays.

Who, loving all, dare none despise,
But with the worst can sympathise,
Who for a truth a martyr dies,
He truly prays.

Who, when a truth to him is known,
Embraces it through smile or frown,
Who dares to hold it, though alone,
He truly prays.

In musing, strength must come to dare,
 Petitions are but empty air,
 Brave action is the only prayer,
Thus learn to pray.

c. Annie Besant, "Burial Service," 6-7

[Here Besant refers to the deceased as “friend and fellow-worker,” underscoring the particular need for writing this service for her fellow Secularists, especially those who are members of the sponsoring organization. Besant emphasizes her concern for the living, who are sorrowful but not fearful. Capitalizing “Death,” she acknowledges the weight of the abstraction, anthropomorphizing it as well, and then—temporarily—she sets it in lower case while conjoining “work” with “love.”

These are words that must be uttered by the layman, since clergy are not appropriate mediators, but the text can still embrace the poet's use of metaphor. Life is depicted as work that is worthy, and as duties move us through life, they give the lie to despair. Intriguingly, the perspective of Procter's poem "One by One the Sands Are Flowing" is echoed in Besant's final appeal to "Mother Nature," itself prefiguring the universalism of Theosophy. Signed with Besant's name, this is the text of the second and shorter of two services printed; the first is signed by Holyoake and runs to about three times the length of her text. The eight-page pamphlet concludes with a passage by Sir John Eliot welcoming death and a poem by Bryant which promotes life that can be "sustained and soothed" in death—either of which may be read before the service. By 1875, Besant was already vice-president of the NSS, having recently succeeded Holyoake in that post.]

FRIENDS,—We are met here to-day to render the last offices of respect, the last tribute of affection, to a friend and fellow-worker, to lay in its last resting-place the body of *[insert name]*. We meet with heavy hearts, heavy with sympathy for those whose sorrow we here reverently share. Across this open grave we look into the very face of Death, and we look with eyes tear-blinded, but without one thought of fear.

Sad is Death at all times. Sad even when, as now *[if the dead had reached old age]*, Death comes in the evening of life, to lay on eyes dim with age the poppies of an endless sleep; when he renders rigid the muscles palsied with a long life's toil, and chills into silence the tongue grown stiff with age. *[Here insert one or other of the following sentences, according as the dead was in mature life or in youth.]* Sadder when Death breaks off manhood *[womanhood]* in its prime, bringing night while noon is high in the heavens, and sleep while vigor and energy for work remain. But saddest of all, perhaps, is Death when he strikes down, as now, the youth *[maid]* in the flush of his *[her]* morning, with all the promise of future unkept, all the hope of the future unfulfilled. It were heartless to deny the sadness and the gloom-shadow cast by Death, and the tears that drop into the open grave are tears that sully no courage, nor have to manhood aught of shame. Yet since Death must come to all to whom life has come, while it were cruelty not to sorrow, it were cowardice to break into despairing and useless repining. While we give tears to the dead, let us from the grave turn back to life—life which has still its duties, if for a while it has lost its glory and its joy.

The message which comes from this open grave is one of love and of work. Of love, in that our dead reminds us that when the grave opens love's work is closed, and bids us be gentle to the living that we may need to drop no tears of remorse over the dead. Love should be the draught offered to the lips of the living, not only the libation poured out on the corpse in the tomb. Of work, in that he *[she]* recalls to us that life is uncertain and brief at its longest; that all we can do to

help and to improve our generation must be done now, while this priceless treasure of life is ours, and that when Death's night overshadows us our work is done for ever, for either good or ill.

We leave our dead to his [*her*] rest. We give him [*her*] back to that great mother who bears and destroys, evolves and recalls, builds up and pulls down—to Nature, the one and All, the Eternal Life and Death, with whom Death is but the first stage of new life. Hope and work belong to the living; sleep and rest to the dead. We leave him [*her*] to eternal rest, and bid him [*her*] tenderly our last Farewell.

3. Annie Besant, “Landlords, Tenant Farmers, and Laborers,”
National Reformer (1877); rpt. *Landlords, Tenant Farmers,*
and Laborers (London: Freethought Publishing Company,
 1877)

[This entry consists of the full text of one of Besant's sustained journalistic essays; soon reprinted as a freestanding pamphlet by her own publishing company, it appeared during the year of the Knowlton trial and just a year before the trial for custody of her daughter that constitutes the climactic chapter of *Autobiographical Sketches*. Here we encounter another tightly developed argument that operates much in the manner of a debate, particularly in her regular practice of anticipating opposition. Basically, Besant recognizes that farmers and laborers are natural allies, and she entreats them to develop a spirit of unity and mutual support in their opposition to landowners. Looking ahead to her Socialist views, she urges formation of some kind of agricultural union. Whether weaving a tale or painting a portrait, Besant exercises considerable literary and rhetorical skills. Strategically, she takes up the farmer's case first, showing genuine understanding and empathy for his way of life; then, when she moves on to the laborer, she speaks from personal observation of his poverty, actually acknowledging that agitation may well be justified. At this key point, she apostrophizes privileged Englishwomen, commending them for their restraint thus far from violence in favor of seeking reform.

Besant generally eschews sentimentality in seeking a solution to this class and economic dilemma; she believes in the power of information to educate especially the laborer about the farmer's economic point of view. Opposed to the bandaid measures associated with Conservatism, she openly—“deliberately and firmly”—calls for more radical change regarding individual land-ownership. Ultimately, Besant recommends doing away with the landowning class acting as such. In the meantime, she considers striking power a last recourse, and she urges change through legal channels to alter taxation, abolish Game Laws and the entail, and reform Land Laws. Primarily programmatic in her approach, Besant can still employ irony and hyperbole to make her points. Yet her own class perspective results in the occasional nostalgic or prejudicial invocation. She continues to celebrate the small inde-

pendent “yeoman” (perhaps this stance reflects a last holdout of the Secularist in her journey to Socialism), and she speculates about the “peasantry” as providing a possible reserve or standing army. Nonetheless, freedom from tyranny or class-based totalitarianism remains her goal—measured at present for Britain, in the later pages of *Our Corner* for the Irish tenant farmer, and eventually for the populace of India.]

Amid the din and the whirl of a great contest, when men range themselves on the one side or on the other, according as their temporary interests, their passions, or their prejudices bid them, those who ought to stand side by side, and shoulder to shoulder, sometimes get thrown face to face, and are found striking at each other. Some petty squabble, some superficial disagreement, turns into enemies those who ought to be friends; and thus, those whose interests are at bottom the same, are transformed into opponents, because their temporary interests appear to clash. The truth of these remarks has been sadly proved by the contests between laborers and farmers; and the position I am anxious to establish is, that the interests of the farmers and the laborers are identical, and they would, if they were wise, combine to form one strong union of the agricultural interest, in antagonism to the interests of the land-owners. To see this, it is necessary to lay down clearly the two positions of farmer and laborer, and to see with what amount of justice each claims to be the injured party.

To give the farmer the precedence. It is perfectly true that there are some wealthy farmers, who keep carriages for their wives and daughters, ride to hounds, train greyhounds, breed hunters, send their sons to college, their daughters to Paris and to Bonn. The laborer eyes his master's wife as she rolls in her easy carriage, and looking round, as he leans on his cottage gate, at the wretched hovel he calls his “home,” he feels bitterly that the land which he labors on, and which his labor enriches, gives to him starvation diet during life, and at last a workhouse to die in; while it gives to his master, who just rides about over-looking everything, luxury and ease, which appear to him insulting and unendurable. The laborer, on the whole, is wrong, because he forgets that the wealthy farmer is wealthy, not because he has earned his wealth by farming, but because he had large capital to start with. If a man has capital, and invests it well, it will inevitably yield him a rich harvest; but the man who desires to use his capital to the best advantage will not, if he be wise, use it in farming. Capitalists are often attracted towards farming because of its accessories. The life of a rich farmer is a pleasant and easy one; it gives employment, but it is employment of an unlaborious kind; it gives excitement, but excitement which is gentle, and only bracingly stimulating. The farmer is free from the hurry, the unrest, the fever, the strain of town life, and of the whirlpool of business toil. His is a wholesome, sturdy, free, and manly existence. Therefore, instead of trying to double or treble it in trade he is content to gain only small profits from his invested capital. The laborer, if he reasoned justly, would

take all this into account; he would remember that his employer draws his income, *not from the land only, but from the capital he previously held, and which he has invested in the land*. If a man be poor, and takes to farming for a livelihood, he must expect to have a sharp struggle even to keep his head above water. The small farmer's life is as laborious, and is more anxious and responsible, than that of the laborer he employs. The profits drawn from farming are, on the whole, small; they are precarious, and are dependent on circumstances beyond the farmer's control. "A bad year"—*i.e.*, unfavorable weather, disease among the stock, failure of crops—is a thing that presses on the farmer more than on the laborer; for the laborer's wages are certain, the farmer's returns are doubtful. From all this it results that the sore and indignant feeling manifested by the farmers during agrarian struggles has its source in a true and natural idea. The farmers feel that their own lot is hard and precarious, that their profits are small, that their position is unassured, and they resist with a blind and bitter determination the action of the laborers to force them into giving a rate of wages which they are conscious, and *justly conscious*, that the profits drawn from the land do not authorise.

To turn to the laborer. One is almost ashamed to have said a word of blame, when one remembers what is the laborer's lot in England. *We* rail against slavery! So far as physical comfort goes, a slave is in an enviable position when his lot is compared with that of our free (?) English laborers. The slave is, at least, housed and fed sufficiently well to keep him in fair working health, for his owner's interests require it; when he is old and worn out, a contemptuous kindness leaves him free air and sunshine, food and home. But the laborer? a hovel, where his master's dogs and horses would not house, is hired to him for shelter; if he is ill, there are plenty of others to take his place; he has no claim on any; when he is old, there is parish pay for him; if he is too helpless to live in his hovel, there is the workhouse open to him; if he dies, there is the parish coffin for him, the pauper's grave. I know that even nominal freedom is better than slavery, and that it is a higher thing to be an English peasant than a slave; but, as regards physical comfort, the lot of the slave is infinitely more desirable. I know, too, that kindly charity brightens the laborer's path, that gentle womanly hands will bring comforts to the suffering, and soft voices cheer his sick room, and gladden his weary heart; but it is not just nor right that the man who labors honestly should be dependent on charitable neighbors, nor that he should be degraded by being forced into accepting with gratitude, as a favor, that which his right hand should have won for him as a right. Besides, as a matter of fact, only some laborers receive even charity. Personally I have known cases of want and suffering, at the very remembrance of which the heart aches, and the eyes fill. I have seen a laborer's home, one small room, with a bed, a table, a few chairs; on that bed slept father, mother, a child sick with scarlet fever, and a dead child; in that room the daily life went on, dressing, eating, living; and farmers round said reprovingly that the man drank, and was a "demagogue," an "ill-conditioned agitator." The man

was not a habitual drunkard, though he did drink now and then, driven to the "public" to escape from his miserable, fever-stricken, death-haunted home. He did "agitate": but who has a word of condemnation for a man who felt that his lot was an unjust one, and strove, however blindly, to remedy a state of things which was driving him to desperation? Ay, and I have known grandfather, grandmother, daughter, and grandchild, and three unmarried men lodgers, sleeping in one room, in two beds. True, the mother was unmarried, the daughter unmarried, though both were mothers. But, O Englishwomen, nurtured in innocence and purity, sedulously guarded from stranger's look, and shielded from prying eyes, have you the heart to blame these women for immodesty and indelicacy, when, if they would, they could not be anything but brazen-faced and coarse? Stern censors talk of the sad immorality of our country villages; but if you herd men and women together like beasts, you have no right to expect from them anything higher than the natural gratification of natural tendencies. My own marvel is, *not* why the laborers are rough, and coarse, and sensual, but how there grow up from these terrible hot-beds of vice, so many sweet, pure blossoms of tender womanhood and noble manhood, worthy to take their place beside the offshoots of pure and happy homes. My own marvel is, *not* why the laborers are agitating now, but how it comes to pass that they have not agitated long ago; *not* why they claim justice now, but why they have endured injustice silently so long. I render my heart's homage to the noble patience, the strong self-control, the pathetic dignity, the steadfast endurance, which have waited, and borne, and suffered so long, and which, even now, do not break out into wild excesses, but quietly and firmly set to work to alter a state of things which would excuse an armed revolt, and to redress injustices which would condone a revolution.

We are then forced to acknowledge that the farmer has justice on his side when he refuses to give higher wages to his laborers, pleading that his profits do not justify larger out-goings; we are forced to acknowledge also that the laborer has justice on his side when he demands higher wages, pleading that he and his family cannot live in decency, much less in comfort, on the miserable pittance he earns week by week.

Various remedies are suggested whereby to help the laborer to better his position; but they none of them go to the root of the matter, and they all have the grave defect that they are aimed against the farmer, and will, if successful, render farming impossible. I contend that the farmer and laborer are natural allies; that their interests are inextricably intertwined; that they must stand or fall together. I pass by all the sentimental arguments about patriarchal feeling, and so on; doubtless kindly feeling between employers and employed is valuable, if it be *mutually* respectful, generous, and true; but at present, while condescension meets servility, and arrogance scowls at independence, the loyal, frank co-operation of man with man in honest friendliness is scarcely attainable, and we must perforce be content, for the present, with a simple contract, fairly carried out on both sides. But my position is grounded on an

undeniable fact, and that radical fact is, that the farmer and the laborer *together* form the agricultural interest; without the farmer's capital the land must remain unfertilised, and without the laborer's thews and sinews the land must remain uncultivated. But all the proposed remedies only try to alter the state of the labor market; if laborers abound in one place, and the rate of wages is low, the superabundant labor is to be drafted off elsewhere. This is all very well to a certain extent, but the stern fact remains that wages must be limited by the paying-power of the farmer; and if there are so few laborers left that he is obliged to give to one the sum he formerly gave to three, he will be compelled, as he cannot afford to treble his expenditure, to decrease his staff of laborers, and therefore his power of putting work into the land. To put pressure of this kind on the employer in cases where the profits arising from the business are very large, is a fair and just way of forcing him to allow the men who make his wealth to share in its advantages; but in farming, where the profits are small, the pressure can only result in one of two ways: either the farmer will resign his work and invest his capital in some more profitable business, or he will decrease the quality and quantity of the labor he employs, and will thereby deteriorate the land he farms. Emigration is another, and still more fatal, remedy. Besides being open to the objections stated above, it has the far worse fault of taking out of the country the men who are invaluable to the State. Emigration takes from the cream of the agricultural working classes: the thrifty, the steady, in a word, the superior peasantry leave our shores, embittered by failure and privation, and are gladly welcomed in other lands, where the labor, despised here, enriches and beautifies the new Fatherland. To England are left the inferior workmen, the careless, improvident, unsteady. The ultimate effect of undue encouragement of emigration is to deprive the State of the energetic men and women who form its life-blood and backbone, and to burden the State with weaker and more helpless citizens. English land will be less well and less intelligently cultivated, and the poor-rates will, it may be added, be indefinitely increased, if the now popular scheme of emigration be carried out with sufficient success to relieve the labor market to an extent which will increase appreciably the scale of wages. There are other suggestions, such as those about co-operative farming by laborers who cannot possibly get sufficient capital to start with, of small allotments at low rental, etc., all of which are based on the good old Conservative idea, that when a wall is thoroughly rotten, the best plan is to conserve it by sticking in a sounder brick here and there and so trying to tinker it up, instead of knocking the crumbling thing down and building a new and stronger wall in its place. It would take too much time to discuss one by one these dilettante, kid-glove schemes; the reformation needed is a radical one. It will justly be asked: If farmer and laborer both have justice on their side, and if the laborer's wages cannot be largely increased without entailing the ruin of the farmer, what possible remedy is there for the present state of things? Deliberately and firmly I answer: The extinction of the present land-

owning class, and the radical revolution of the present idea as to the right of appropriating land.

We will take the latter half of the sentence first, and point out, though necessarily very briefly, why the present idea that one citizen has a right to appropriate land, and to will it to his heirs, is an injustice to the whole body of citizens. "The essential principle of property," says J.S. Mill, "being to assure to all persons what they have produced by their labor, and accumulated by their abstinence, this principle cannot apply to what is not the produce of labor, the raw material of the earth." The "rights of property" are not in any way touched by a discussion on the appropriation of land by individuals; land is not property in the strict sense of the term, and ought not to be allowed to be held as such. The soil of the globe is the life-estate of the inhabitants of the globe, and cannot rightly or justly be monopolised by a few for their own benefit, to the exclusion of the rest. The proprietorship of the land should be vested in the Government, as the trustee of the nation, to be used for the good of the nation, and not for the good of a few favored individuals. The soil of England is, in justice, the possession of the whole people of England, inherited by the people by natural right as Englishmen—their birthright, in fact. Natural gifts can never be rightfully monopolised by a section of mankind. If, then, no right can be manufactured by law which gives individuals a just claim to hold land as their own property, and to will it as such to their heirs, it is manifest that the existence of the present landowning class is an injustice, and as such ought to be put an end to. A man who owns land, draws money from it, and does nothing to improve it, is an anomaly that must simply be extinguished. For it must be remembered that, although land is a natural gift, yet the improvement of land is the result of human labor, and comes therefore under the head of property. If unfertile and barren land is rented by a man who invests his capital in the land, and thus renders it fertile and rich, that man has a just claim to reap the return of his capital and labor. The land is not his property; the improvement in the land is. It is manifestly for the benefit of the nation that the nation's land should be highly cultivated, and should be made to return as rich harvests as possible. Therefore, the Government, as trustee, might rightly and wisely rent large portions of the land to capitalists; and it must also, from the nature of the business, give to the capitalists security of tenure, so that the farmer may feel certain that, in putting his capital into the ground, he will be able in due time to reap his fair and just reward. In this sense, property in land is justifiable; land may be held by individuals, on condition that they cultivate it, improve it, enrich it. But this does not justify the landowner's existence; it justifies only that of the farmer and the laborer. What do the great landlords do for the land they own? *Simply Nothing*. They own it; *voilà tout*. These fortunate individuals let out their so-called "property" to the farmers; they do nothing to improve the land, and therefore they have no right to hold the land; they draw vast incomes from the soil, and put nothing into it. Their existence

is an injustice to the community, and, as landowners, they must disappear. The present holders have, it should be said in passing, a right to compensation from the State when the State deprives them of the land they hold by long prescription; the landlords must not be unjustly treated because they have been born the heirs of an injustice.

It is an error to imagine that the State, in thus “confiscating the land” as it is called—*i.e.*, in resuming rights that it should never have allowed to be taken from it—will be doing anything new, or unprecedented. Not at all; it will only be doing on a large scale what it is continually doing on a small. When a railway is needed for the public good, Parliament has no scruples about passing a Bill to compel the occupiers of the land through which the line must go, to sell their “property.” If this land were really property, it would be unjust to force the owners to part with it, but it is seen, in these cases, that the land may rightfully be claimed when it is required for the good of the State. Carry out this same principle, and the landowners will cease to exist.

The farmer has too often joined hands with the landowner against the laborer; that is to say, half the agricultural interest has allied itself with its natural enemy, in order to crush the other half. What do the farmers owe the landlords that they should make common cause with them against the class on whose labor the value of the land depends? The landlord lets land—to which he has no right—to the farmer; that is, to the man whose improvement of the land gives him a real property in it; he exacts a high rent; he gives no lease, or a short lease. When the farmer’s care, and energy, and money have doubled the value of the land, the owner, who has done nothing to it, steps in to raise the rent; that is, he claims the interest of the farmer’s capital. The owner expects the farmer to feed from his crops some thousands of wild creatures, which the owner shoots, but which the farmer may not touch. In fact, the farmer very generously invests capital, works the year round, rises early, lives hardly, preserves game, and improves farm-buildings, in order that the landowner may draw a larger income, live idly and in luxury, shoot in the autumn, and in time let his enriched farm to a new man at a still higher rental. And this is the farmer’s friend! In order to be at peace with a class to whom he owes nothing, but which fattens on his toil, the farmer quarrels with his laborers, on whom he himself depends.

The low wages of the laborer are the ruin of the farmer. They oblige the peasant to live from hand to mouth, to put by nothing against “the rainy day” of sickness and old age; and thus they throw the laborer on “the parish” for every week during which he is out of work, and make him a burden on the rates in his old age. These rates fall on the farmer, and therefore every man who earns sufficient to keep himself and his family “off the parish” is so much less weight thrown ultimately on the farmer’s purse. Higher wages to the laborer mean the lessened taxation of the farmer. Therefore, as the farmer cannot give higher wages while he is being ground down by heavy rent and heavy taxes, the first step to free the farmer and the laborer is for them to combine into a union

which shall make it its one object to strike against landlordism. The tremendous power such a Union might wield, in case of need, by sternly refusing to rent or cultivate land at all, would simply bring the landlords to their knees, and enable the agriculturists to demand whatever terms they chose. But, before proceeding to this extremity, the Union would bend all its efforts to alter the incidence of taxation, to abolish the Game Laws, and to reform the Land Laws. The first step forwards would be to extend the county franchise, so that the farmers and laborers might combine to send into Parliament men who would represent the agricultural interest, instead of that of the landlords. This is a necessary preliminary. The next step is to throw the weight of taxation on the land. In 1692 there was a land tax consisting of "one-fifth of the whole annual value," and land thus contributed about a third of the annual revenue raised by taxation. If this proportion were restored, the relief to the mass of the nation would be enormous, and all the taxes which at present throw so unfair a proportion of the taxation on the middle and lower classes might be swept away. But toward the end of the 18th century Parliament passed an Act that the taxes contributed by land should remain at the figure fixed in 1692. Thus the whole contribution of land for State purposes is now a little over one-eighty-sixth part of the total taxation, instead of being about one-third. The tax paid by the present Duke of Westminster for his land in London, being one-fifth of its value in 1692, must really represent its present value very justly! And the fact that that eminent nobleman has done so much to earn his vast wealth is one which is very interesting to the contemplative and admiring bystander. When the agricultural interest shall have altered these little anomalies, and forced those who, owning land, do nothing for it, to pay their fair share of taxation, the farmers will find themselves in a position to pay their laborers better, and to have their own pockets fuller. The abolition of entail, the easier buying and selling of land, and other reforms in this direction, would facilitate the ultimate transfer of the ownership of the land to the people themselves, as represented by their elected government. It is very important that small—even the smallest—capitalists should have it in their power to acquire land in small holdings on the same terms as to security of tenure on which the large farmers would hold theirs from the State. A large number of peasant proprietors are the safeguard of a State. There is a steadiness, a dignity, an independence, about the men who cultivate their own little farms that no other employment seems to give. The old English "yeomanry" were men of this description; such are now some agriculturists in Cumberland and Westmoreland; such are the Swiss peasants, the Norwegian, the Flemish, the Rhenish. All observers unite in reporting that, to quote M. de Sismondi, "wherever we find peasant proprietors we find also the comfort, security, confidence in the future, and independence, which assure at once happiness and virtue." This sturdy, independent peasantry would form a strong backbone to the country in times of trouble; it might easily be drilled and trained suffi-

ciently to replace a standing army in England, and would offer a reliable guarantee of steady progression without hasty revolution. Certainly, it would not yield to the “higher classes” a supple obedience or a servile courtesy, for it would be a class which would secure England for ever against domestic tyranny or class despotism.

To end with the proposition with which I started: it is to the union of farmers and laborers that we must look for the solution of the present difficulty: the farmer and the laborer, the two classes whose capital and labor give them a property in the soil, must stand shoulder to shoulder to push off from the land he burdens the landlord who takes all, and gives nothing back. One in interest, as they are one in work, the two must combine against the class whose flourishing depends on their ill-requited labor. The interests of the landlord and the farmer are opposed, the interests of the farmer and laborer are identical.

4. From Annie Besant, *The Law of Population: Its Consequences, and Its Bearing upon Human Conduct and Morals* (London: Freethought Publishing Company, 1877), with the conclusion of *Theosophy and the Law of Population* (Benares and London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1896)

- a. Annie Besant, “Chapter I: The Law of Population,” *The Law of Population*, 3-9

[Besant superseded Knowlton’s out-of-date and circumspect *Fruits of Philosophy* with her own pamphlet once the fight for the principle of issuing such a publication was well underway. Again she was acting in a pioneer capacity, particularly as she argues that access to birth control information constitutes a class issue, and she posits that this access is an inevitability. She draws her information and support extensively—as is appropriate—from multiple authorities, particularly providing key quotations from Malthus, James and John Stuart Mill, Darwin, and George Drysdale. However, all this attention to supporting evidence, especially that illustrated by the natural world, demonstrates how necessary it still was to establish the validity of her claims and justify her very endeavor. Clearly Besant is comfortable with scientific discourse, as was evident in her testimony during the Knowlton trial and would be in her monthly science column in *Our Corner* and in the “proofs” provided by her pamphlet *Why I Don’t Believe in God* (Appendix A). The publicity generated by the Knowlton trial fueled sales of *The Law of Population* such that within four and a half years of its initial publication it had sold 50,000 copies, and by the time that she withdrew it from further sales in 1891, its total sales numbered 175,000. For the larger context of the debate about dissemination of birth control information, see Sections XIV-XVI of *Autobiographical Sketches* and their pertinent

notes, while for Knowlton's own preface, see Appendix C. For this excerpt, the ellipses are Besant's, except for those within the especially lengthy quotation taken from *Origin of Species*.]

The law of population first laid down in this country by the Rev. T.R. Malthus in his great work entitled "The Principle of Population," has long been known to every student, and accepted by every thinker. It is, however, but very recently that this question has become ventilated among the many, instead of being discussed only by the few. Acknowledged as an axiom by the naturalist and by the political economist, the law of population has never been appreciated by the mass of the people. The free press pioneers of the last generation, Richard Carlile, James Watson, Robert Dale Owen—these men had seen its importance and had endeavored, by cheap publications dealing with it from its practical side, to arouse attention and to instruct those for whom they worked. But the lesson fell on stony ground and passed almost unheeded; it would, perhaps, be fairer to say that the fierce political conflicts of the time threw all other questions into a comparative shade; nor must the strong prejudice against Malthus be forgotten—the prejudice which regarded him as a hard, cold theorist, who wrote in the interest of the richer classes, and would deny to the poor man the comfort of wife and home. The books issued at this period—such as Carlile's "Every Woman's Book," Knowlton's "Fruits of Philosophy," R.D. Owen's "Moral Physiology"—passed unchallenged by authority, but obtained only a limited circulation; here and there they did their work, and the result was seen in the greater comfort and respectability of the families who took advantage of their teachings; but the great mass of the people went on in their ignorance and their ever-increasing poverty, conscious that mouths multiply more rapidly than wages, but dimly supposing that Providence was the responsible agent, and that where "God sends mouths" he ought to "send meat" [Psalm 127.3]. One or two recognised advocates for the people did not forget the social side of the work which they had inherited; men like Austin Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh, carrying on the struggle of Carlile and Watson, were not careless of this vital portion of it and Mr. Holyoake's "Large and Small Families," and Mr. Bradlaugh's declaration that the *National Reformer* was to be "Malthusian" in its political economy, proved that these two, at least, were sound on this scarcely regarded branch of the social science.

Now, all has changed; Malthusianism has become one of the "burning questions" of the day, and a low-priced work, stating clearly the outlines of the subject, has become a necessity. Our paternal authorities, like their predecessors, entertain a horror of cheap knowledge, but they will have to assent to the circulation of cheap information on social science, as those who went before them were compelled to tacitly assent to cheap information touching kings and priests.

The law of population, tersely stated, is—"there is a tendency in all animated existence to increase faster than the means of subsistence." Nature produces more life than she can support, and the superabundant life is kept down by the want of food. Malthus put the law thus: "The constant tendency in all animated life [is] to increase beyond the nourishment prepared for it." "It is observed by Dr. Franklin," he writes, "that there is no bound to the prolific nature of plants or animals but what is made by their crowding and interfering with each other's means of subsistence.... Throughout the animal and vegetable kingdoms, nature has scattered the seeds of life abroad with the most profuse and liberal hand; but has been comparatively sparing in the room and the nourishment necessary to rear them." "Population," Malthus teaches, "when unchecked, goes on doubling itself every twenty-five years; in the northern States of America, where the means of subsistence have been more ample, the manners of the people more pure, and the checks to early marriages fewer than in any of the modern States of Europe, the population has been found to double itself, for above a century and a half successively, in less than twenty-five years.... In the back settlements, where the sole employment is agriculture, and vicious customs and unwholesome occupations are little known, the population has been found to double itself in fifteen years. Even this extraordinary rate of increase is probably short of the utmost power of population."

The "power of increase" of the human species, according to John Stuart Mill, "is indefinite, and the actual multiplication would be extraordinarily rapid, if the power were exercised to the utmost. It never is exercised to the utmost, and yet, in the most favorable circumstances known to exist, which are those of a fertile region colonised from an industrious and civilised community, population has continued for several generations, independently of fresh immigration, to double itself in not much more than twenty years.... It is a very low estimate of the capacity of increase, if we only assume that in a good sanitary condition of the people, each generation may be double the number of the generation which preceded it." James Mill wrote: "That population therefore has such a tendency to increase as would enable it to double itself in a small number of years, is a proposition resting on the strongest evidence, which nothing that deserves the name of evidence has been brought on the other side to oppose."

Mr. McCulloch tells us that "it has been established beyond all question that the population of some of the states of North America, after making due allowance for immigration, has continued to double for a century past in so short a period as twenty, or at most five-and-twenty, years." M. Moreau De Jonnès gives us the following table of the time in which the population of each of the under-mentioned countries would double itself:—

Turkey	would take	...	...	555 years
Switzerland	"	...	...	227 "
France	"	...	...	138 "
Spain	"	...	...	106 "
Holland	"	...	...	100 "
Germany	"	...	...	76 "
Russia	"	...	...	43 "
England	"	...	...	43 "
United States	"	...	...	25 "

(Without reckoning immigrants.)

We shall take but a narrow view of the law of population if we confine ourselves exclusively to human beings. Man is but the highest in the animal kingdom, not a creature apart from it, and the law of population runs through the animal and vegetable worlds. To take the commonest illustration: the horse is but a slowly breeding animal, producing but one at a birth, and that at considerable intervals of time; yet how small a proportion of the horses of a country are either stallions or brood mares; the reproductive organs of the colt are destroyed in the enormous majority of those born, and, nevertheless, our production of horses suffices for the vast needs of our commercial and luxurious classes. Darwin, in his "Origin of Species," writes:—"There is no exception to the rule that every organic being naturally increases at so high a rate that, if not destroyed, the earth would soon be covered by the progeny of a single pair. Even slow-breeding man has doubled in twenty-five years, and at this rate, in a few thousand years, there would literally not be room for his progeny. Linnaeus has calculated that if an annual plant produced only two seeds—and there is no plant so unproductive as this—and their seedlings next year produced two and so on, then in twenty years there would be a million plants.... But we have better evidence on this subject than mere theoretical calculations, namely, the numerous recorded cases of the astonishingly rapid increase of various animals in a state of nature, when circumstances have been favorable to them during two or three following seasons. Still more striking is the evidence from our domestic animals of many kinds which have run wild in many parts of the world; if the statements of the rate of increase of slow-breeding cattle and horses in South America, and latterly in Australia, had not been well authenticated, they would have been incredible. So it is with plants; cases could be given of introduced plants which have become common throughout whole islands in a period of less than ten years.... In a state of nature almost every plant produces seed, and amongst animals there are very few which do not annually pair. Hence, we may confidently assert that all plants and animals are tending to increase at a geometrical ratio, that all would most rapidly stock every station in which they could anyhow exist, and that the geometrical tendency to increase must be checked by destruction at some period of life."

Mr. John Stuart Mill remarks: "The power of multiplication inherent in all organic life may be regarded as *infinite*. There is no species of vegetable or animal, which, if the earth were entirely abandoned to it, and to the things on which it feeds, would not in a small number of years overspread every region of the globe of which the climate was compatible with its existence."

The rapid multiplication of rabbits in Australia has lately given a startling instance of reproductive power; a number of rabbits were taken over and let loose; the district was thinly peopled, so they were not shot down to any great extent; their natural enemies, the hawks, weasels, etc., that prey on their young in England, were not taken over with them; food was abundant, and there was no check to keep them back; the consequence was that whole districts were overrun by them, and the farmers were at their wits' end to save their crops from the swarming rodents. In France, again, owing to the wholesale destruction of small birds, there was a perfect plague of insects, and the inhabitants of many districts have striven to import birds, so as to prevent the insects from practically destroying the vegetation.

While in the vegetable and animal kingdoms the rapidity of the increase is generally far greater than in the human race, we have yet seen how rapidly man has been found to increase where the circumstances surrounding him were favorable to vigorous life. We have never yet, however, seen the full power of reproduction among mankind; the increase of population in America "falls very far short," says the author of the "Elements of Social Science" [namely, Dr. George Drysdale], "of the possible rate of increase, as is seen by the short average of life in America, and by the large amount of the reproductive power which, even in that country, is lost from celibacy and prostitution.... The capacity of increase in the human race, as in all other organised beings, is, in fact, boundless and immeasurable."

But while animated existence increases thus rapidly, no such swift multiplication can be secured of the means of subsistence. The means of subsistence of vegetable life are strictly limited in quantity; the amount obtainable from the soil may be increased by manure, by careful tillage, by rotation of crops, by improved methods of husbandry, but none the less is this amount limitable, while there is no limit to the power of life-production; if the soil and air and light could be indefinitely stretched, vegetable life would still suffice without effort to clothe the increased surface. But since the size of the globe inexorably limits the amount of vegetable produce possible of growth, the limited vegetable produce must, in its turn, limit the amount of animal life which can be sustained. While increased knowledge, skill and care may augment the means of subsistence obtainable from the earth, yet animal life multiplies more rapidly than can its food. As is truly said by the author just quoted: "From a consideration of the law of agricultural industry, and an estimate of the rate at which the means of subsistence could be increased in old countries, even under the most

favorable circumstances, it may be inferred with certainty that these means of subsistence could not possibly be increased so fast as to permit population to increase at its natural rate.... Let us apply the American rate of increase to the population of this country. Is it conceivably possible that the population of England or any old country should double itself every twenty-five years? In Great Britain there are now" (the book was written many years ago) "about twenty-one millions; is it conceivable that the means of subsistence could be so rapidly increased as to allow these twenty-one millions to swell to forty-two millions in the first twenty-five years; to eighty-four millions in the next; 168 millions in the next, &c? The supposition is evidently absurd. Even the rate of increase of the last fifty-three years (in which the population has doubled) cannot possibly be long continued. If it were, it would increase our population in three centuries to about 1,300 millions; or, in other words, to more than the total population of the globe, which is estimated at about 1,000 millions."

Wherever, then, we look throughout Nature, we find proofs of the truth of the law, that "there is a tendency in all animated existence to increase faster than the means of subsistence." This is the law of which Miss Martineau said that it could be no more upset than a law of arithmetic; this is the law which John Stuart Mill regarded "as axiomatic"; this is the law which the Lord Chief Justice designated "an irrefragable truth." Controversialists may quarrel as to its consequences, and may differ as to man's duty in regard to them, but no controversy can arise among thinkers on the law itself, any more than on the sphericity of the earth.

- b. Annie Besant, from the final two paragraphs of *Theosophy and the Law of Population*, 19-20

[As both my general introduction to *Autobiographical Sketches* and her remarks in Chapter IX of *An Autobiography* (237-44) make clear, Besant underwent a change of heart about the use of birth control after her conversion to Theosophy. By 1896, both *Autobiographical Sketches* and *The Law of Population* were out of print, and she never chose to reprint them herself, even going so far as to have the plates for the latter destroyed after she had settled in India. In short, Neo-Malthusianism was incompatible with reincarnation as Theosophy subscribed to it. Besant waited three years after becoming a Theosophist to clarify in detail her new stance, suggesting that she must have been torn about the issue (the text of the 1896 pamphlet originally appeared in the theosophical journal *Lucifer* 8 [July 1891]:394-99). Honest enough not to shy away from making her views known to the public, she was also not one to express regret about her past efforts to alleviate the suffering of the poor, and in *An Autobiography* she proudly pointed to the 1888 judgment of the Australian Supreme Court supporting a bookseller's legal right to sell her pamphlet. Ultimately, Besant was able to reach some sense of compromise regard-

ing birth control, neither endorsing nor condemning it. The reader should note that asceticism here is not to be confused with reference to celibacy in her reply to Foote's charges; see the entry from *Why I Became a Theosophist* in Appendix A.]

... Passing from Materialism to Theosophy, I must pass from neo-Malthusianism to what will be called asceticism, and it is right to state this clearly, since my name has been so long and so publicly associated with the other teaching. I have refused either to print any more or to sell the copyright of the "Law of Population," so that when those that have passed beyond my control have been disposed of by those who bought them, no more copies will be circulated. I only lately came to this definite decision, for I confess my heart somewhat failed me at the idea of withdrawing from the knowledge of the poor, so far as I could, a palliative of the heart-breaking misery under which they grow, and from the married mothers of my own sex, the impulse to aid whom had been my strongest motive of action in 1877, a protection against the evils which too often wreck their lives and bring many to an early grave, worn old before even middle age has touched them. Not until I felt obliged to admit that the neo-Malthusianism teaching was anti-Theosophical, would I take this step: but, having taken it, it is right to take it publicly, and to frankly say that my former teaching was based on a mistaken view of man's nature, treating him as the mere product of evolution instead of as the spirit intelligence and will without which evolution could not be.

Many will be inclined to ask: "Are you not sorry that you suffered so much for what was based on a mistaken view of human life?" Frankly, no. From that arduous and painful struggle, into which I entered against all the instincts of my nature and in defiance of my social training, from the sole desire to help the poor and the suffering, I have learned lessons which I would not have missed for the sake of any escape from. I learned in it to stand alone, careless of ill-informed or self-seeking opinion; to face opprobrium for the sake of principle, social ostracism for the sake of duty, hatred for the sake of love. The method was mistaken, but the principle was right, and this at least is the fruit of that past bitter struggle: the strength to embrace an unpopular cause, to face ridicule and stem opposition, strength which may have its place for service in defence of that Cause to which my Leader and Teacher H[elena] P[etrovna] B[lavatsky] judged me worthy to dedicate my life.

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