

## THE WOMAN QUESTION

Taking the debate on women's emancipation back into the class system and out into Utopia. A contribution by E. Belfort Bax.

<p>05- Taking a hint from the suggestion of "TATTLER"<sup>1</sup> a few weeks ago in <b>Justice</b><sup>2</sup> that it is time the above question was fairly thrashed out among Socialists the editor of <b>Justice</b> has invited me to briefly state my views.</p> <p>10- Up till quite recently Socialists like Radicals and other advanced persons, were supposed, as a matter of course, to swallow that conventional lie of modern civilisation – the theory of "woman the victim of man's oppression." This dogma, which, like the doctrine of the Manchester school,<sup>3</sup> that the ideal of human liberty is attained under the capitalistic regime of free 15- industrial and commercial competition, has dominated the thought of the Anglo-Saxon race for two generations and has been the chief instrument in effecting a revolution which has placed the whole judicial and administrative 20- machinery of the country at the disposal of one sex to oppress the other (in all causes, i.e., into which the sex question prominently enters.) Let us look at the present condition of this so- called "victim."</p> <p>25- While under our present marriage laws the wife is under no obligation to maintain the husband, not even though she have money and he be destitute (saving the ratepayer's right to be recouped for his maintenance in the workhouse) the husband is bound at criminal 30- law to maintain his wife <i>in comfort under all circumstances</i>. Hitherto exception has been made in the case of adultery on the part of the wife. Now, in a Bill before Parliament this last reservation is proposed to be virtually 35- abrogated by a "caoutchouc" paragraph which enforces "alimony" where the husband can be shown by his defect or "misconduct to have contributed to the adultery."</p> <p>40- Thus, if a man has ever had a dispute with his wife or even come home late, as in a recent case, he will presumably have, "by defect or misconduct, contributed to the adultery;" just as now if a man ever had words with his wife 45- and raised his voice above its normal pitch or come home late he may deemed to have committed technical cruelty entitling the said wife to separation or divorce with "alimony."</p> <p>50- 2. A wife is perfectly free to leave her husband at will, and he has no remedy (Jackson case). If a husband leaves his wife she can compel him to surrender to her a third of his income or earnings, and for desertion, i.e., for leaving her without money, he can be 55- punished with hard labour.</p> <p>3. A husband is further liable for her debts and her civil delinquencies (torts).</p> <p>60- 4. A husband cannot obtain relief against a wife for any act, negligence, or language of hers, <i>while for any one of these considerations</i> she can get judicial separation, exclusive rights</p>	<p>65- over the children, if any, and a third of his income or earnings for herself, with so much per head in addition for each child. Thus if a man gives his wife an unfriendly pat on the cheek with his open hand she can get esta- blished comfortably for life on the fruits of his labour; if, on the contrary, she smashes his head in with a poker she may be fined five 70- shillings which the injured husband has to pay; and should he succeed in obtaining a separation it is only on condition of his keeping the virago in comfortable idleness.</p> <p>75- A little illustration will bring home to the reader this complete serfdom of the husband to the wife under our marriage laws. A man, not long ago, obtained the offer of employment in America. His wife did not wish him to go. Not having any money or work home he insisted. The wife who had money of her own, and to whom he moreover gave £25 with promise of 80- more on his arrival at his destination, went straight to the Guardians,<sup>4</sup> had him arrested on board ship at Southampton, dragged before the magistrate, and sentenced to three months 85- hard labour. The sentence was subsequently quashed after the man had been in gaol and was ruined. Most feudal barons would surely have been satisfied with such powers as this over their "villeins."<sup>5</sup></p> <p>90- At criminal law it is a well-known fact which anyone may verify by the records of the courts that women enjoy <i>an almost complete immunity</i> for all offences committed against men, as such. For assault, perjury, and blackmailing practised 95- on men, women are virtually never even pro- secuted, let alone convicted. On the other hand, savage and vindictive laws, savagely and vindictively enforced by judges are dealt out to men for the most trifling assaults or other offences 100- committed against women. In fact it seems that the express aim of the modern political woman and her "Women's" Associations is to deprive men of the last shred of protection against criminal women with a view of giving the latter 105- every facility for exercising their calling.</p> <p>If one looks at the matter fairly, one surely cannot be surprised at occasional violence committed on women – wife assaults, wife murders, &amp;c. Legalised tyranny and inequality 110- has always throughout history led to sporadic outbursts of brutality on the side of its victims. It is always so, and always will be so.</p> <p>Such is the present position of advantage enjoyed by women by virtue of their sex. Such 115- are the facts as opposed to the popular "legend" on the subject. Space forbids my further analysing the present subjection at law of men to women in this article, which is the more unnecessary as I have elaborated the subject in 120- further detail elsewhere.</p>
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125 Of course, under Socialism, the side of the  
 130 question based on property falls away. Our  
 135 existing infamous marriage laws must  
 140 disappear when both sexes are alike  
 145 economically free. When once this is so, a  
 150 perfectly free marriage, without let or  
 hindrance, would necessarily result. Should, as  
 Herbert Burrows<sup>6</sup> seems to have suggested, a  
 bastard "public opinion" try any games of  
 attempting by ostracism to supply the place of  
 the defunct coercive legal bond in enforcing any  
 special form of marriage, such as monogamy,  
 we shall have to do our best to strangle that  
 "public opinion" as quickly as possible. If driven  
 to it, even opponents might combine in an  
 association whose members pledged themselves  
 (like the Oneida Creekers),<sup>7</sup> to marital relations  
 strictly limited to a fixed period, say six  
 months. To thus raise anti-monogamy to the  
 level of a principle would surely be a pity as a  
 result of the "cussedness" of trying to compel  
 outward conformity to monogamy among  
 people whose temperaments were unsuited to  
 it. In using the ugly word "lust" for any form  
 of marriage he does not like, Herbert Burrows  
 resembles the respectable bourgeois of my  
 boyhood's days who used to stigmatise every  
 form of liberty he did not like (e.g., the right  
 of workmen to combine) as "licence." No, friend  
 Herbert, I trust a society even half-way into  
 Socialism will be past being caught with that  
 sort of chaff.

155 At the same time I regard it as highly  
 160 probable that for a long while to come voluntary  
 165 monogamy (voluntary, in fact, and not in name  
 170 merely) will be the dominant form of the sexual  
 175 relation. The attempt to enforce it, however,  
 180 whether by law or "public opinion," will I am  
 equally convinced be contrary to the whole  
 spirit of a reasonable society. To make out that  
 there is an absolute and immutable moral  
 superiority in monogamy irrespective of  
 temperament or circumstances over every other  
 form of sexual relation is surely absurd. Only  
 by society encouraging perfect freedom can the  
 most perfect form of the sexual relation, that  
 best adapted to human needs, be wrought out.  
 Monogamy, like every other institution, will  
 have to make good its case by showing its  
 superiority to other forms, and not by the aid of  
 external tyranny, whether juridical or social.  
 Before concluding this article I would point  
 out what is liable to be overlooked, viz., that the  
 coercive effect of "public opinion" could only be  
 operative in a Socialist society when the whole  
 community was practically unanimous in  
 condemning a course of conduct and not in  
 defence of any arbitrary dogma, however  
 strongly held by a section of the community.  
 The case is different under capitalist conditions  
 when a man can be forced to wear a "pot" hat  
 against his will, owing to the "public opinion" of  
 the class on whom he is dependent for his  
 livelihood insisting on it. E. Belfort Bax<sup>8</sup>

P. 6 in *Justice*, 27th July 1895. Quoted on <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bax/1895/07/woman.htm>  
 Transcribed by Ted Crawford and marked up by Einde O'Callaghan for the Marxists' Internet Archive.  
 Corrected, edited and footnoted by F. Poirier for this Morris page at Université Paris 13.

1. A semi-serious chronicle in *Justice* was entitled "Tattle" and signed "Tattler".
2. Organ of the Social-Democratic Federation, which William Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax had left in December 1884 to form the Socialist League, which they had to leave in its turn when it was wholly taken over by anarchists.
3. The Manchester school = An ultra-liberal school of thought, advocating complete laissez-faire and free-trade and defended mostly by Manchester industrialists.
4. The Guardians of the Poor, elected officers who oversaw the administration of the 1834 Poor Law, and had a judicial power to impose payment on recalcitrant husbands rather than spend rate-payers' money to support an abandoned wife.
5. There is no difference in English between "villeins" and "serfs". This is an intimation that the most downtrodden people in the middle-ages might have enjoyed more freedom and privileges than contemporary Britons.
6. Herbert Burrows (1845-1921). A founder-member of the SDF, he was a friend of Annie Besant's, whom he had met in 1879. He was active in supporting her during the match-girls' strike (1888) and during the London dock strike (1889). Together with Besant, he turned to theosophy.
7. The Oneida Community was first formed in 1842 by a Vermont "Perfectionist," John Humphrey Noyes, and took its name from its relocation in former Oneida territory, along the Oneida Creek, midway between Boston and the Niagara Falls in the State of New-York. The members of the community advocated and practised "complex marriages," i.e. polygamy and polyandry: everybody was to be married to everybody at some point, but any exclusive sexual relationship between two persons was prohibited — they had to share or be forcibly separated for a length of time. According to one commentator, "the perfect life could exist only where there was complete spiritual equality." The implication was that personal property had to give way to communal property, while individuals could no longer claim any right over anybody's life, even within marriage. The Oneida Community enforced a strictly egalitarian code of conduct and labour division between men and women, childcare and household chores included — which led men to invent or develop household appliances, such as washing machines and dishwashers. And in their preoccupation with the avoidance of any feeling of discrimination while being careful to allow for the adjustment of people to their jobs, they operated a system of job rotation. The same rule applied to their "complex marriages." They were successful manufacturers of all sorts of staple goods, from canned fruit to mouse-traps, and eventually developed a particular skill as silversmiths. In 1880, the community was transformed into a joint-stock company which still exists today as "Oneida Ltd" and specialises in tableware. See <http://www.oneida.com> and <http://www.nyhistory.com/central/oneida.htm>.
8. Ernest Belfort Bax (1854-1918), a friend and political collaborator of William Morris.