THE VERDICT IN THE BRADLAUGH

CASE

*(From the Standard.)*

The verdict of the jury is, as the verdicts of English juries so commonly are, substantially a just and proper one…. To descant upon the magnitude of the evils which civilisation has brought upon humanity, and the purity of intention with which Dr. Knowlton’s followers have attempted to remove them, is to wander away from the real issue. The book is calculated, in the terms of the verdict, to debase public morality, and as such its publication cannot be allowed.

*(From the Times)*

It is impossible to doubt that this book is mischievous and corrupting in the hands of the many thousands to whom it has found its way. Unhappily, the great moral facts of this metropolis are too suggestive of the ideas which really form the attractions of this book. It is a present, it is stated, from America to this country. But for a very long time past London has been plied with works the professional and even scientific character of which thinly disguised a too evident purpose to prey on the diseased imagination…. Of course, after the verdict especially, we have no wish to call in question the intentions of the publishers. They may believe the book the best present they could make to a young man or young woman, indeed to a whole family, about to enter life upon a career of utility and honour. But, on the other hand, we are also aware that there are persons who sincerely believe the greatest service they can render their innocent neighbours is to strip them of everything they fondly regard as a virtuous sentiment or right principle of action. There certainly are persons who think they are only opening our eyes and breaking our fetters when they reduce goodness, and even affection, to a calculation of material consequences. Indeed, some do not leave us the trouble of a calculation for they tell us, and think it the very best of good tidings, that we grow out of our antecedents and upon them by laws so irresistible and uniform as to save us from responsible action. Happily, the real truth is that the world is greater than one man or one opinion, and since we have to choose between Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant on the one hand, and certain reserves and proprieties surrounding the first laws of Nature and the domestic hearth on the other, we are glad to find that this well-intentioned pair are not held to have established a right to dictate new rules of action and new conditions of existence to a reluctant and, as it feels, an insulted world.

*(From the Daily News.)*

It cannot be said that the moral effect of the verdict given on Thursday will counteract the evil done by the promiscuous circulation of the book …. In the face of this result, the decision to which the Government has come not to prosecute the Society of the Holy Cross for the “Priest in Absolution” seems to us prudent. As the Attorney-General stated, it is not the duty of her Majesty’s Government to become the censors of public morals, and to prosecute every work which they deem objectionable. Perhaps it might be desirable that through the intervention and by the discretion of a Public Prosecutor such ill-judged attempts in the interests of public purity and morality as that which has resulted in the wide circulation of “Fruits of Philosophy,” should be made rather more difficult than they are now.

*(From the Daily Telegraph.)*

Every latitude was allowed Mrs. Besant and her colleague in their defence, and they availed themselves of their opportunity with considerable eloquence, and no little ingenuity. The matter, however, was, as the Lord Chief Justice pointed out, pre-eminently one for the jury to decide, and with their finding we must say we entirely agree . . . . The offence of Mr. Bradlaugh and Mrs. Besant lay, as the Lord Chief Justice suggested, not so much in the actual matter which they chose to publish, as in the effect it was likely to have on the minds of the public: and the jury apparently held that there was no comparision whatever between recognized works on physiology and political economy, on the one hand, and this mischievous publication on the other. That the pressure of population is the chief cause of poverty, and that poverty is inseparably connected with unhappiness, misery, and crime, we are all agreed. Nor is anything more reasonable than that the grave responsibilities attendant on the marriage state should be fully pointed out and carefully insisted on. It is another matter to publish for indiscriminate sale in the open streets a work which, while professing to deal with questions of population and national prosperity, in reality suggests vice of a character so abandoned, revolting, and unnatural, that to see its precepts accepted as “philosophical fruit” would be to witness the first beginnings of the downfall of this nation, while to disseminate them is a crime against public decorum and the simplicities of human nature. Whatever may be thought about the expediency of this particular prosecution, it is unquestionably a public duty to protect the young from those whose pernicious teaching would, if allowed to go unchecked by the strong arm of the law, destroy body and soul alike. We have spoken of this matter with pain, and we would willingly, if we could, have passed it over. The liberty of the press is, and always has been, dear to every Englishman: but between the liberty of the press and the right which has now been publicly claimed to deprave the imaginations of households, no connection is possible. No matter how honest the motive may have been, the act done by those who published and sold this vile work is far worse in its tendency and effects than if they had offered poisoned food for sale in the markets, or thrown deadly drugs into wells and drinking fountains. The greatest public and private wrongs have been perpetrated in the name of “good intentions,” and we can conceive no greater wrong than that which, through the medium of a cheap and easily accessible publication, and under the guise of a philosophical treatise, pollutes the mind and degrades the morals of the young and ignorant.