

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE SUPPRESSION OF VICE (E. Review, 1809.)

Statement of the Proceedings of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, from July 9 to November 12, read at their General Meeting, held November 12, 1804. With an Appendix, containing the Plan of the Society, &c. &c. &c. London. 1804.

An Address to the Public from the Society for the Suppression of Vice, instituted in London, 1802. Part the Second. Containing an Account of the Proceedings of the Society from its original institution. London. 1804.

A SOCIETY, that holds out as its object the suppression of vice,¹ must at first sight conciliate the favour of every respectable person; and he who objects to an institution calculated apparently to do so much good, is bound to give very clear and satisfactory reasons for his dissent from so popular an opinion. We certainly have, for a long time, had doubts of its utility; and now think ourselves called upon to state the grounds of our distrust.

Though it were clear that individual informers are useful auxiliaries to the administration of the laws, it would by no means follow that these informers should be allowed to combine,—to form themselves into a body,—to make a public purse,—and to prosecute under a common name. An informer, whether he is paid by the week, like the agents of this society—or by the crime, as in common cases,—is, in general, a man of a very indifferent character. So much fraud and deception are necessary for carrying on his trade—it is so odious to his fellow-subjects,—that no man of respectability will ever undertake it. It is evidently impossible to make such a character otherwise than odious. A man who receives weekly pay for prying into the transgressions of mankind, and bringing them to consequent punishment, will always be hated by mankind; and the office must fall to the lot of some man of desperate fortunes and ambiguous character. The multiplication, therefore, of such officers, and the extensive patronage of such characters, may by the management of large and opulent societies, become an evil nearly as great as the evils they would suppress. The alarm which a private and disguised accuser occasions in the neighbourhood, is known to be prodigious, not only to the guilty, but to those who may be at once innocent, and ignorant, and timid. The destruction of social confidence is another evil, the consequence of information. An informer gets access to my house or family,—worms my secret out of me,—and then betrays me to the magistrate. Now, all these evils may be tolerated in a small degree, while, in a greater degree, they would be perfectly intolerable. Thirty or forty informers roaming about the metropolis, may frighten the mass of offenders a little, and do some good: ten thousand informers would either create an insurrection, or totally destroy the confidence and cheerfulness of private life. Whatever may be said, therefore, of the single and insulated informer, it is quite a new question when we come to a corporation of informers supported by large contributions. The one may be a good, the other a very serious evil; the one legal the other wholly out of the contemplation of law,—which often, and very wisely, allows individuals to do, what it forbids to many individuals assembled.

If once combination is allowed for the suppression of vice, where are its limits to be? Its capital may as well consist of 100,000*l. per annum*, as of a thousand: its numbers may increase from a thousand subscribers, which this society, it seems, had reached in its second year, to twenty thousand: and in that case, what accused person of an inferior condition of life would have the temerity to stand against such a society? Their mandates would very soon be law; and there is no compliance into

which they might not frighten the common people, and the lower orders of tradesmen. The idea of a society of gentlemen, calling themselves an Association for the Suppression of Vice, would alarm any small offender, to a degree that would make him prefer any submission to any resistance. He would consider the very fact of being accused by them as almost sufficient to ruin him.

An individual accuser accuses at his own expense; and the risk he runs is a good security that the subject will not be harassed by needless accusations,—a security which, of course, he cannot have against such a society as this, to whom pecuniary loss is an object of such little consequence. It must never be forgotten, that this is not a society for *punishing* people who have been found to transgress the law, but for *accusing* persons of transgressing the law; and that before trial, the accused person is to be considered as innocent, and is to have every fair chance of establishing his innocence. He must be no common defendant, however, who does not contend against such a society with very fearful odds;—the best counsel engaged for his opponents,—great practice in the particular court and particular species of cause,—witnesses thoroughly hackneyed in a court of justice,—and an unlimited command of money. It by no means follows, that the legislature, in allowing individuals to be informers, meant to subject the accused person to the superior weight and power of such societies. The very influence of names must have a considerable weight with the jury. Lord Dartmouth, Lord Radstock, and the Bishop of Durham, *versus* a Whitechapel butcher or a publican! Is this a fair contest before a jury? It is not so even in London; and what must it be in the country, where a society for the suppression of vice may consist of all the principal persons in the neighbourhood? These societies are now established in York, in Reading, and in many other large towns. Wherever this is the case, it is far from improbable that the same persons at the Quarter or Town Sessions, may be both judges and accusers; and still more fatally so, if the offence is tried by a special jury. This is already most notoriously the case in societies for the preservation of game. They prosecute a poacher;—the jury is special; and the poor wretch is found guilty by the very same persons who have accused him.

If it be lawful for respectable men to combine for the purpose of turning informers, it is lawful for the lowest and most despicable race of informers, to do the same thing; and then it is quite clear that every species of wickedness and extortion would be the consequence. We are rather surprised that no society of perjured attorneys and fraudulent bankrupts has risen up in this metropolis for the suppression of vice. A chairman, deputy-chairman, subscriptions, and an annual sermon, would give great dignity to their proceedings; and they would soon begin to take some rank in the world.

It is true that it is the duty of grand juries to inform against vice; but the law knows the probable number of grand jurymen, the times of their meeting, and the description of persons of whom they consist. Of voluntary societies it can know nothing,—their numbers, their wealth, or the character of their members. It may therefore trust to a grand jury what it would by no means trust to an unknown combination. A vast distinction is to be made, too, between official duties and voluntary duties. The first are commonly carried on with calmness and moderation; the latter often characterised, in their execution, by rash and intemperate zeal.

The present Society receives no members but those who are of the Church of England. As we are now arguing the question generally, we have a right to make any supposition. It is equally free, therefore, upon general principles, for a society of sectarians to combine and exclude members of the Church of England; and the suppression of vice may thus come in aid of Methodism, Jacobinism, or of any set of principles, however perilous, either to Church or State. The present Society may perhaps consist of persons whose sentiments on these points are rational and respectable. Combinations, however, of this sort may give birth to something far different; and such a supposition is the fair way of trying the question.

We doubt if there be not some mischief in averting the fears and hopes of the people from the known and constituted authorities of the country to those self-created powers;—a Society that punishes in the Strand, another which rewards at Lloyd’s Coffee-house! If these things get to any great height, they throw an air of insignificance over those branches of the government to whom these cares properly devolve, and whose authority is by these means assisted, till it is superseded. It is supposed that a project must necessarily be good, because it is intended for the aid of law and government. At this rate, there should be a society in aid of the government, for procuring intelligence from foreign parts, with accredited agents all over Europe. There should be a voluntary transport board, and a gratuitous victualling office. There should be a duplicate, in short, of every department of the State,—the one appointed by the King, and the other by itself. There should be a real Lord Glenberrie in the woods and forests,—and with him a monster, a voluntary Lord Glenberrie, serving without pay, and guiding *gratis*, with secret counsel, the axe of his prototype. If it be asked, who are the constituted authorities who are legally appointed to watch over morals, and whose functions the Society usurp? our answer is, that there are in England about 12,000 clergy, not unhandsomely paid for persuading the people, and about 4000 justices, 30 grand juries, and 40,000 constables, whose duty and whose inclination it is to compel them to do right. Under such circumstances, a voluntary moral society does indeed seem to be the purest result of volition; for there certainly is not the smallest particle of necessity mingled with its existence.

It is hardly possible that a society for the suppression of vice can ever be kept within the bounds of good sense and moderation. If there are many members who have really become so from a feeling of duty, there will necessarily be some who enter the Society to hide a bad character, and others whose object it is to recommend themselves to their betters by a sedulous and bustling inquisition into the immoralities of the public. The loudest and noisiest suppressors will always carry it against the more prudent part of the community; the most violent will be considered as the most moral; and those who see the absurdity will, from the fear of being thought to encourage vice, be reluctant to oppose it.

It is of great importance to keep public opinion on the side of virtue. To their authorised and legal correctors, mankind are, on common occasions; ready enough to submit; but there is something in the self-erection of a voluntary magistracy which creates so much disgust that it almost renders vice popular, and puts the offence at a premium. We have no doubt but that the immediate effect of a voluntary combination for the suppression of vice, is an involuntary combination in favour of the vices to be suppressed; and this is a very serious drawback from any good of which such societies may be the occasion; for the state of morals, at any one period, depends much more upon opinion than law; and to bring odious and disgusting auxiliaries to the aid of virtue, is to do the utmost possible good to the cause of vice. We regret that mankind are as they are; and we sincerely wish that the species at large were as completely devoid of every vice and infirmity as the President, Vice-President, and Committee of the Suppressing Society; but, till they are thus regenerated, it is of the greatest consequence to teach them virtue and religion in a manner which will not make them hate both the one and the other. The greatest delicacy is required in the application of violence to moral and religious sentiment. We forget, that the object is, not to produce the outward compliance, but to raise up the inward feeling, which secures the outward compliance. You may drag men into church by main force, and prosecute them for buying a pot of beer,—and cut them off from the enjoyment of a leg of mutton;—and you may do all this, till you make the common people hate Sunday, and the clergy, and religion, and everything which relates to such subjects. There are many crimes, indeed, where persuasion cannot be waited for, and where the untaught feelings of all men go along with the violence of the law. A robber and a murderer must be knocked on the head like mad dogs; but we have no great opinion of the possibility of indicting men into piety, or of calling in the Quarter Sessions to the aid of religion. You may produce outward conformity by these means; but you are so

far from producing (the only thing worth producing) the inward feeling, that you incur a great risk of giving birth to a totally opposite sentiment.

The violent modes of making men good, just alluded to, have been resorted to at periods when the science of legislation was not so well understood as it now is; or when the manners of the age have been peculiarly gloomy or fanatical. The improved knowledge, and the improved temper of later times, push such laws into the back ground, and silently repeal them. A Suppressing Society, hunting everywhere for penalty and information, has a direct tendency to revive ancient ignorance and fanaticism,—and to re-enact laws which, if ever they ought to have existed at all, were certainly calculated for a very different style of manners, and a very different degree of information. To compel men to go to church under a penalty appears to us to be absolutely absurd. The bitterest enemy of religion will necessarily be that person who is driven to a compliance with its outward ceremonies, by informers and justices of the peace. In the same manner, any constable who hears another swear an oath has a right to seize him, and carry him before a magistrate, where he is to be fined so much for each execration. It is impossible to carry such laws into execution; and it is lucky that it is impossible,—for their execution would create an infinitely greater evil than it attempted to remedy. The common sense, and common feeling of mankind, if left to themselves, would silently repeal such laws; and it is one of the evils of these societies, that they render absurdity eternal, and ignorance indestructible. Do not let us be misunderstood: upon the object to be accomplished, there can be but one opinion;—it is only upon the means employed, that there can be the slightest difference of sentiment. To go to church is a duty of the greatest possible importance; and on the blasphemy and vulgarity of swearing, there can be but one opinion. But such duties are not the objects of legislation; they must be left to the general state of public sentiment; which sentiment must be influenced by example, by the exertions of the pulpit and the press, and, above all, by education. The fear of God can never be taught by constables, nor the pleasures of religion be learnt from a common informer.

Beginning with the best intentions in the world, such societies must in all probability degenerate into a receptacle for every species of tittle-tattle, impertinence, and malice. Men whose trade is rat-catching, love to catch rats; the bug-destroyer seizes on his bug with delight; and the suppressor is gratified by finding his vice. The last soon becomes a mere tradesman like the others; none of them moralise, or lament that their respective evils should exist in the world. The public feeling is swallowed up in the pursuit of a daily occupation, and in the display of a technical skill. Here, then, is a society of men, who invite accusation,—who receive it (almost unknown to themselves) with pleasure,—and who, if they hate dulness and inoccupation, can have very little pleasure in the innocence of their fellow-creatures. The natural consequence of all this is, that (besides that portion of rumour which every member contributes at the weekly meeting) their table must be covered with anonymous lies against the characters of individuals. Every servant discharged from his master's service,—every villain who hates the man he has injured,—every cowardly assassin of character,—now knows where his accusations will be received, and where they cannot fail to produce some portion of the mischievous effects which he wishes. The very first step of such a Society should be, to declare, in the plainest manner, that they would never receive any anonymous accusation. This would be the only security to the public, that they were not degrading themselves into a receptacle for malice and falsehood. Such a declaration would inspire some species of confidence; and make us believe that their object was neither the love of power, nor the gratification of uncharitable feelings. The Society for the Suppression, however, have done no such thing. They request, indeed, the signature of the informers whom they invite; but they do not (as they ought) make that signature an indispensable condition.

Nothing has disgusted us so much in the proceedings of this Society, as the control which they

exercise over the amusements of the poor. One of the specious titles under which this legal meanness is gratified is, *Prevention of Cruelty to Animals*.

Of cruelty to animals, let the reader take the following specimens:

Running an iron hook in the intestines of an animal; presenting this first animal to another as his food; and then pulling this second creature up and suspending him by the barb in his stomach.

Riding a horse till he drops, in order to see an innocent animal torn to pieces by dogs.

Keeping a poor animal upright for many weeks, to communicate a peculiar hardness to his flesh.

Making deep incisions into the flesh of another animal while living, in order to make the muscles more firm.

Immersing another animal, while living, in hot water.

Now we do fairly admit, that such abominable cruelties as these are worthy the interference of the law: and that the Society should have punished them, cannot be matter of surprise to any feeling mind.—But stop, gentle reader! these cruelties are the cruelties of the Suppressing Committee, not of the poor. You must not think of punishing these.—The first of these cruelties passes under the pretty name of *angling*;—and therefore there can be no harm in it—the more particularly as the President himself has one of the best preserved trout streams in England.—The next is *hunting*;— and as many of the Vice-Presidents and of the Committee hunt, it is not possible there can be any cruelty in hunting.* The next is, a process for making *brawn*—a dish never tasted by the poor, and therefore not to be disturbed by indictment. The fourth is the mode of *crimping* cod; and the fifth, of boiling lobsters; all high-life cruelties, with which a justice of the peace has no business to meddle. The real thing which calls forth the sympathies, and harrows up the soul, is to see a number of boisterous artisans baiting a bull, or a bear; not a savage hare, or a carnivorous stag,—but a poor, innocent, timid bear;—not pursued by magistrates, and deputy lieutenants, and men of education,—but by those who must necessarily seek their relaxation in noise and tumultuous merriment,—by men whose feelings are blunted, and whose understanding is wholly devoid of refinement. The Society detail, with symptoms of great complacency, their detection of a bear-baiting in Blackboy Alley, Chick Lane, and the prosecution of the offenders before a magistrate. It appears to us, that nothing can be more partial and unjust than this kind of proceedings. A man of ten thousand a year may worry a fox as much as he pleases,—may encourage the breed of a mischievous animal on purpose to worry it; and a poor labourer is carried before a magistrate for paying sixpence to see an exhibition of courage between a dog and a bear! Any cruelty may be practised to gorge the stomachs of the rich,—none to enliven the holidays of the poor. We venerate these feelings which really protect creatures susceptible of pain, and incapable of complaint. But heaven-born pity, now-a-days, calls for the income-tax, and the court guide; and ascertains the rank and fortune of the tormentor before she weeps for the pain of the sufferer. It is astonishing how the natural feelings of mankind are distorted by false theories. Nothing can be more mischievous than to say, that the pain inflicted by the dog of a man of quality is not (when the strength of the two animals is the same) equal to that produced by the cur of a butcher. Hailer, in his Pathology, expressly says, *that the animal bitten knows no difference in the quality of the biting animal's master*; and it is now the universal opinion among all enlightened men, that the misery of the brawler would be very little diminished, if he could be made sensible that he was to be eaten up only by persons of the first fashion. The contrary supposition seems to us to be absolute nonsense; it is the desertion of the true *Baconian* philosophy, and the substitution of mere unsupported conjecture in its place. The trespass, however, which calls forth all the energies of a

suppressor, is the sound of a fiddle. That the common people are really enjoying themselves, is now beyond all doubt: and away rush Secretary, President, and Committee, to clap the cotillon into the Compter, and to bring back the life of the poor to its regular standard of decorous gloom. The gambling houses of St. James's remain untouched. The peer ruins himself and his family with impunity; while the Irish labourer is privately whipped for not making a better use of the excellent moral and religious education which he has received in the days of his youth!

It is not true, as urged by the Society, that the vices of the poor are carried on in houses of public resort, and those of the rich in their own houses. The Society cannot be ignorant of the innumerable gambling houses resorted to by men of fashion. Is there one they have suppressed, or attempted to suppress? Can anything be more despicable than such distinctions as these? Those who make them seem to have for other persons' vices all the rigour of the ancient Puritans—without a particle of their honesty or their courage. To suppose that any society will ever attack the vices of people of fashion, is wholly out of the question. If the Society consisted of tradesmen, they would infallibly be turned off by the vicious customers whose pleasures they interrupted: and what gentleman so fond of suppressing, as to interfere with the vices of good company, and inform against persons who were really genteel? He knows very well that the consequence of such interference would be a complete exclusion from elegant society; that the upper classes could not, and would not, endure it; and that he must immediately lose his rank in the world, if his zeal subjected fashionable offenders to the slightest inconvenience from the law. Nothing, therefore, remains, but to rage against the Sunday dinners of the poor, and to prevent a bricklayer's labourer from losing, on the seventh day, that beard which has been augmenting the other six. We see at the head of this Society the names of several noblemen, and of other persons moving in the fashionable world. Is it possible they can be ignorant of the innumerable offences against the law and morality which are committed by their own acquaintances and connections? Is there one single instance where they have directed the attention of the Society to this higher species of suppression, and sacrificed men of consideration to that zeal for virtue which watches so acutely over the vices of the poor? It would give us very little pleasure to see a duchess sent to the Poultry Compter; but if we saw the Society flying at such high game, we should at least say they were honest and courageous, whatever judgment we might form of their good sense. At present they should denominate themselves a Society for suppressing the vices of persons whose income does not exceed 500*l. per annum*; and then, to put all classes upon an equal footing, there must be another society of barbers, butchers, and bakers, to return to the higher classes that moral character, by which they are so highly benefited.

To show how impossible it is to keep such societies within any kind of bounds, we shall quote a passage respecting circulating libraries, from their Proceedings.

“Your Committee have good reasons for believing, that the circulation of their notices among the printsellers, warning them against the sale or exhibition of indecent representations, has produced, and continues to produce, the best effects.

“But they have to lament that the extended establishments of circulating libraries, however useful they may be, in a variety of respects, to the easy and general diffusion of knowledge, are extremely injurious to morals and religion, by the indiscriminate admission which they give to works of a prurient and immoral nature. It is a toilsome task to any virtuous and enlightened mind, to wade through the catalogues of these collections, and much more to select such books from them as have only an apparent bad tendency. But your Committee being convinced that their attention ought to be directed to those institutions which possess such powerful and numerous means of poisoning the minds of young persons, and especially of the female youth, have therefore begun to make some endeavours towards their better regulation.”—*Statement of the Proceedings*

for 1804, pp. 11, 12.

In the same spirit we see them writing to a country magistrate in Devonshire, respecting a wake advertised in the public papers. Nothing can be more presumptuous than such conduct, or produce, in the minds of impartial men, a more decisive impression against the Society.

The natural answer from the members of the Society (the only answer they have ever made to the enemies of their institution) will be, that we are lovers of vice,—desirous of promoting indecency, of destroying the Sabbath, and of leaving mankind to the unrestrained gratification of their passions. We have only very calmly to reply, that we are neither so stupid nor so wicked as not to concur in every scheme which has for its object the preservation of rational religion and sound morality;—but the scheme must be well concerted,—and those who are to carry it into execution must deserve our confidence, from their talents and their character. Upon religion and morals depends the happiness of mankind;—but the fortune of knaves and the power of fools is sometimes made to rest on the same apparent basis; and we will never (if we can help it) allow a rogue to get rich, or a blockhead to get powerful, under the sanction of these awful words. We do not by any means intend to apply these contemptuous epithets to the Society for the Suppression. That there are among their numbers some very odious hypocrites, is not impossible; that many men who believe they come there from the love of virtue, do really join the Society from the love of power, we do not doubt: but we see no reason to doubt that the great mass of subscribers consists of persons who have very sincere intentions of doing good. That they have, in some instances, done a great deal of good, we admit with the greatest pleasure. We believe, that in the hands of truly honest, intrepid, and, above all, discreet men, such a society might become a valuable institution, improve in some degree the public morals, and increase the public happiness. So many qualities, however, are required to carry it on well,—the temptations to absurdity and impertinence are so very great,—that we ever despair of seeing our wishes upon this subject realised. In the present instance, our object has been to suppress the arrogance of suppressers,—to keep them within due bounds,—to show them that to do good requires a little more talent and reflection than they are aware of,—and, above all, to impress upon them that true zeal for virtue knows no distinction between the rich and the poor; and that the cowardly and the mean can never be the true friends of morality, and the promoters of human happiness. If they attend to these rough doctrines they will ever find in the writers of this Journal their warmest admirers, and their most sincere advocates and friends.

*“How reasonable creatures,” says the Society, “can enjoy a pastime which is the cause of such sufferings to brute animals, or how they can consider themselves entitled, for their own amusement, to stimulate those animals, by means of the antipathies which Providence has thought proper to place between them, to worry and tear, and often to destroy each other, it is difficult to conceive. So inhuman a practice, by a retribution peculiarly just, tends obviously to render the human character brutal and ferocious,” &c. &c. (*Address*, pp. 71, 72.) We take it for granted, that the reader sees clearly that no part of this description can possibly apply to the case of *hunting*.