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William Morris on Prostitution: A Letter of August 17, 1885

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William Morris on Prostitution: A Letter of August 17, 1885

Terry L. Meyers
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The following letter by William Morris refers to the St. James's Hall Conference and Hyde Park demonstration of August 21 and 22, 1885. The letter is not in Norman Kelvin's *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, 3 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), but appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, August 19, 1885, p. 12.

The conference and demonstration were being organized, largely by W.T. Stead, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, a part of Stead's "New Crusade" against pornography, indecency, and prostitution, and in support of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill that had just been passed by the House of Commons on August 7, 1885 and accepted by the House of Lords on August 10. Stead was eager to move forward the campaign begun by his famous exposé "The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon," and hoped that the meeting and demonstration would help, according to his biographer, "to generate sentiment for purity reforms, to spur individual actions, and to form 'Vigilance Committees' in every town."¹

The letter was printed in the *Pall Mall Gazette* as one of dozens received by the Demonstration Committee expressing regrets at being unable to attend, participate, or speak—there was, given the season, a "general absence of ladies and gentlemen of influence in town" (p. 11). Morris's letter distinguishes itself by its independence of thought, by its setting the problem of prostitution and its solution in an economic and social context, and by its polite skepticism of some of the dynamics and values behind the movement being celebrated:

Kelmscott House, Upper Mall, Hammersmith,
August 17.

Sir,—The Socialist League is going to have a platform of its own, at which I shall have to speak as in duty bound. But besides that, if you will allow me to define

my position a little closer, I must say that I fear the matter is now being pushed in a wrong direction. I am far from sure as to the wisdom of some of the main provisions of the bill (though, of course, I am opposed to the Tory and "respectable" opponents of the movement), and I am quite sure that no legislative enactment will touch prostitution as long as the present condition of the people exists; as long, in short, as there are rich and poor classes. I think it is misleading and dangerous to put any other view than this before people, and I especially fear the very possible danger of a Puritan revival obscuring the real causes of this hideous unhappiness. Of course you understand that I have nothing to say against the single-heartedness of most of those engaged in the movement, and that I think they have done good service in exposing the rottenness of society on this point. With many thanks for your kind persistence in asking me to speak, I am, dear Sir, yours faithfully,
WILLIAM MORRIS.

¹Raymond L. Schults, *Crusader in Babylon: W.T. Stead and the Pall Mall Gazette* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1972), p. 169. Schults provides a detailed account of Stead's campaign on behalf of the Criminal Law Amendment Bill (pp. 128-192); the *Pall Mall Gazette* of the period is, of course, itself a prime source of further information.