

I RECEIVED a short time ago a well-written pamphlet, the author of which is Behramji M. Malabari, who takes a deep and fervent interest in the question of child marriages in India. The pamphlet is called "An Appeal from the Daughters of India," and a deep, solemn, soul-stirring appeal it is. I only wish space would permit me to make copious extracts from it in order to point out, if such an appalling condition needs pointing out, the dire necessity for a prompt and vigorous reform. The author proceeds to say :—

"A STRUGGLE has been going on in India for the last six years, of which England seems to have heard little beyond faint and fitful echoes. The struggle began long before the reign of Akbar. Under that wisest of Oriental statesmen it manifested itself to advantage, and has been maintained since, with varying degrees of success. It has been a battle against custom, born in selfishness, and nursed by pride, prejudice and vested interest. The custom has always been powerful and widespread; the protest against it feeble and spasmodic, like the pecking of birds at a huge cobra that sits self-contained, throwing its coils round the little assailants and swallowing them up almost unperceived.

"It appeared to stand unmoved for generations, gathering strength while assailants after assailants—poets, patriots, philanthropists—perished in the attack, baffled simply by its inertia, or driven into the snare of its fatal fascination. In this position we find the custom of infant marriages, and the movement against it, towards the dawn of our nineteenth century, which has witnessed the opening of a brighter day for so many nations struggling with the powers of darkness. It has ever been a drawn battle, but a most unequal one; on one side custom, mystified into religion in order to enthrall the popular imagination, supported by the combined forces of caste, family pride and priestly interest; on the other side, brave soldiers of light, scattered and despairing, able at their best to engage in skirmishes outside the citadel. What could be expected even from these our bravest, unskilled and unorganised, as they have been, and fighting against such tremendous odds? Still, they have done more than was expected of them, those heroes of early Indian Reform.

"FURTHER, it may be worth while to give a bare enumeration here of the evils resulting from infant marriage—evils that have been admitted as such by opponents as well as friends of reform, and which strike one as self-evident. Infant marriage leads to physical and moral deteriora-

tion of the race. The contract of marriage, entered into by others, is followed almost immediately by the ceremony which is binding for life. The average time of marriage for girls has been ascertained to be about seven; thousands of the so-called marriages take place at an earlier age.

"SUCH early marriages, as a rule, superinduce early consummation. Girls of twelve and thirteen have to bear the burdens of wifehood and motherhood. Not a few of these "married martyrs" succumb to the shock of the first child-birth. Those that survive have a hairbreadth escape, and are generally left little better than wrecks. The children in such cases are weak and puny. The rate of infant mortality in India is terrible. The husbands themselves suffer physically, though not to the same extent as the wives. Of moral degradation there is no need to say much in this place. The amount of domestic infelicity and of pauperism may be better imagined than described.

"SUPPOSING the boy husband is able to stand the physical effects, he has still to pay the penalty of too early married life, by loss of self-restraint and of manly independence. With the blight of early marriage resting on them, it is too much to expect the sons of India to be patriots and heroes, her daughters to be saints and heroines of history. For the brightest, happiest, loveliest period of life, the youth of the nation, is being sacrificed on the altar of this suicidal custom.

"THE worst result of all, for the wife, is the death of her husband. Very often he dies early. This means more than death itself to the widow. She cannot re-marry; must live a secluded, despised life; a life sometimes so unnatural that she may prefer death by suicide, unless led astray, in which case she is worse than dead to herself and to society.

"THUS, in its public aspects infant marriage is both an economic as well as a social evil. It is in some of these aspects that the State is called upon to recognise it as an evil."

I THINK we need, perhaps, hardly add anything else to the mournful, piteous spectacle presented to us. I do most fervently hope that our most gracious and good Queen (I can hardly venture to hope that her Majesty will see this wish of mine), the Empress of the country whose moral and physical well-being is so overshadowed, may put forth the power she wields so well herself, and see that something is *done* to mitigate this dreadful evil, which, until effaced, must bar and divert the progress of the whole of the Indian Empire.

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