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The Coming International Opium Conference

BY Julia Ellsworth Ford



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The International Opium Conference, to be held in Geneva, this coming November should have WIDE PUBLICITY. No effort to abolish the opium trade can be successful unless there is a strong, vigorous public opinion back of it. Ellen La Motte says, "A conference at Geneva is about the safest place for NOT reaching the people. The reason that the traffic has been able to grow to its present dimensions is because the public is kept in the dark."

London is the proper place--better than New York, which would be second choice-because the English people are unaware of their opium traffic and the enormous sums derived from it. "Today their trade is greater than twelve years ago." (White Cross International Anti-Narcotic Society.)

The three nations primarily responsible are Great Britain, Persia and Turkey. Great Britain is the most powerful nation engaged in the opium traffic. Nothing can be done to check this trade until the British people themselves rise up and put a stop to it. When the conference takes place in Switzerland, hardly a word of it is likely to be published in the London papers, if one may judge from what happened in respect of the conferences held in the past two years. A conference in London would give this needed publicity.

The Hague Opium Convention in 1912 had as its object the suppression of trade in narcotic drugs. When this matter was handed over to the League of Nations, a resolution was offered by the Chinese delegate that opium production should be limited to the strict MEDICAL AND SCIENTIFIC NEEDS of the world. Yet, THROUGH THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS two years ago, the words "MEDICAL AND SCIENTIFIC" WERE STRICKEN OUT and "LEGITIMATE" SUBSTITUTED, thus devitalizing the Treaty of 1912, permitting opium and its derivatives throughout the Orient and their entry into the United States.

Great Britain claims the right to reserve the privilege of furnishing the drug to her subjects in India. There are seven thousand shops in India and hundreds of chests of opium are sold every month at public auction. But we note she does not reserve this privilege for her people in England. " 'The Times' of July 20, 1923, contained an account of a man convicted of having opium and opium-smoking implements in his possession, who was given three years in jail. The Recorder, in passing sentence, said that there was no doubt that the practice of taking cocaine and smoking opium was doing much to demoralize society. Feeling that this was so, Parliament this year increased the personal penalty from six months imprisonment to ten years penal servitude. Parliament was determined-and the Recorder, in his humble way, was determined to assist the Legislature-in excising this moral cancer from the social system." But many of the non-cooperators, following Mahatma Gandhi's instructions, trying to stop the opium traffic in India. are put in prison. These two standards as to the use of opium are rather difficult for the Orientals to understand.

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At a previous conference, the Rt. Hon. Sastri, employed by the British Government, testified that the "Indian people insisted on sanctioning opium in India, alleging that it has long been used as a household remedy, that the people would revolt if deprived of this drug and that opium to the Indian was like tea to the English." The name the East Indians call this gentleman is not complimentary. I have since seen Sastri's confession of ignorance of the real state of affairs and his regrets to the Rev. C. F. Andrews, a fine Englishman who has lived in India many years. Now note the result of that false Mr. P. W. Wilson, English lecturer, quoted Sastri's testimony: words last Winter at Columbia University in a discussion with Syud Hossain, a distinguished journalist from India, and he sings this lullaby to quiet the fears of the babe-like faith of the American people.

We have over a million addicts in America. We do not grow opium ourselves and can import only enough to make morphia for our medical needs, with but a small surplus for export to such countries as require it for medical purposes yet do not manufacture it themselves. Moreover, our Government is careful to ascertain that such quantities as we export are for genuine medical use and not for purposes of abuse. No longer can Europeam morphia, etc., be sent to this country in bond for transhipment to the Orient and elsewhere. This Jones-Miller bill, which puts strict control on our narcotic traffic, was passed in 1922.

But we still treat many of our addicts as criminals in prison, and out, whereas, according to medical opinion, addicts can only be relieved of their frightful suffering and cured by gradually lessening the doses. "Almost every nation at Geneva, except the United States, derives revenues from opium." "Nine-tenths of the world's production is used for the purpose of revenue." (White Cross International Anti-Opium Society.)

France, with vast Colonial possessions, has begun to recognize the danger of opium and is taking active steps to suppress it. Within the past year, she has completely abolished it in her South Seas colonies, and is reducing it rapidly in Indo-China.

The opium used for eating and smoking is Indian opium. Turkey and Persia produce a finer grade, used in the manufacture of morphia. This has a distinct value for, although it is abused, the world needs a certain amount of this opium for medical purposes. But the Indian opium has not even the excuse that it is useful in medicine, and THE SOLE OBJECT OF ITS PRODUCTION IS TO SUPPLY SMOKERS AND EATERS FOR REVENUE.

If Great Britain could bring herself to reduce her opium output, Persia and Turkey would probably follow suit. The output from the British Government in India amounts to about 1,400 tons per year; from Persia, 162 tons; from Turkey, 250 tons. As the greatest producer, as the most powerful and influential of these three countries, Great Britian should lead the way in this reform and not hang back, excusing herself, until Persia or Turkey set the pace.

It is, therefore, up to Great Britain. Five thousand medical men in England made a public declaration, a few years ago, that opium smoking and eating is morally and physically a poison. Do our people or the English people know anything about this menace? Why not? Because the Conferences are held in Geneva, a city which will afford the least publicity. "Hong Kong, with a small population of 500,000 has secured, year by year, enough opium to satisfy the medical needs of 150,-000,000 people. Where does it go? It is smuggled into China, to a friendly people." (Rev. C. F. Andrews.)

Judson Taylor, head of the Island Mission in China, says, "In eighty years the Protestant churches secured 80,000 church" communicants. During that same eighty years period the British Government has created 150,000,000 VICTIMS OF THE OPIUM HABIT."

After the war, the British Indian Government signed a contract with the British Hong Kong Government for another five years to supply opium in large monthly quantities. This was acknowledged in the House of Commons. (Rev. C. F. Andrews.)

Great Britain has now established a morphine factory in the Straits Settlement. (Oriental Research Library.) Opium has been pouring into Syria, Siam, North Borneo, Ceylon.

Great Britain is now the keeper of Mesopotamia, awarded to her by the League of Nations. Yet her first act on assuming control was to establish an opium monopoly there and TO SELL OPIUM FOR THE PURPOSE OF RAISING REVENUE. This presents an extraordinary spectacle—with one hand, establishing an opium monopoly in a mandated territory and with the other signing the Covenant of the League of Nations, which includes adherance to the Hague Opium Convention, an international agreement supposedly designed to end the opium traffic. The League appears to have shut its eyes to this incongruity. Can the League not afford to risk the larger publicity and, if not, may one not assume that there are strong influences at work in favor of the least publicity?

Lord Robert Cecil came to this country to get us into the League of Nations. He claimed that the League has done "noble work" and "dealt vigorous blows" to the opium traffic. The League's sanction of opium production for "legitimate purposes" means the continued use for eating and smoking which, in certain of these far eastern countries, is legal, or "legitimate." Nothing particularly noble and vigorous about this, and, as we have mentioned, the League seems to have overlooked the Mesopotamia discrepancy. If the League could bring itself to hold this opium conference in London, questions like "legitimate" and Mesopotamia could come in for a good airing.

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I cannot close without speaking of the magnificent campaign of the White Cross International Anti-Narcotic Society in Seattle, Washington, directed toward making public opinion throughout the United States. They are also in correspondence with ten thousand educators, and have written to every labor union and to members of the House of Commons of Great Britain, setting forth the serious world situation and urging cooperation.

This is India's great opportunity and she should not lose it. If India is a member of the League in HER OWN RIGHT, she has a right to send delegations to this international conference that will truly represent her. If not, there should be other Indians of high standing present to protest that their country has never been properly represented—that such men as the Rt. Hon. Sastri, Mr. John Campbell and Lord Hardinge have been the exponents of the British rather than the Indian point of view. Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Lajpat Rai and the Rev. C. F. Andrews would be able to lay before this conference an opinion on the morality of opium using, which would take sharp issue with the official attitude. If, therefore, this conference could be held in London, the English people would be in a position to hear both sides and to throw their influence one way or the other.

We have every reason to believe that Ramsay MacDonald and the present splendid British Labour Government will help, notwithstanding that when Lt. Col. Freemantle asked in the House of Commons the other day the present position as to the "regulation of the international opium traffic and restriction of production," Arthur Henderson replied that the "general supervision of that traffic was entrusted to the League of Nations" and that dismissed the subject.

The object of this conference is to end the drug traffic. The American and scientific position is that the production of opium be limited to the strict medicinal needs of the world and that all other use be considered an abuse and not legitimate. If this principle is adopted it will be a first step. If America is beaten by Great Britain's objections, it will strain Anglo-American relations and do enormous damage to the prestige of the League of Nations. The people of America are looking to the people of England to help.

What are the newspapers of America going to do to help this cause? Will they help? If they do, there must be CEASE-LESS agitation in the American press—not so much over local conditions as over the cause.

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