

# An Equal Moral Standard

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## WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

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“ Without Male Chastity Female Chastity is Impossible.”

WHEN people speak of a double moral standard with regard to the relation of the sexes they are apt to forget that in actual fact there is no such thing as a double moral standard. In every act of illicit sex-relations both a man and a woman are concerned and consequently the amount of such immorality is exactly equal between the sexes. It only varies in distribution, or, to put it more simply, a comparatively small number of immoral women are the partners of a large number of immoral men. In all considerations of the relative morality of men and women it is desirable to bear this in mind because it shows very clearly that the morals of women, *as a sex*, can never be higher than the morals of men.

### The Double Moral Standard.

Although, in fact, the sexes must necessarily correspond to each other in the total amount of irregular sex-relations, yet the civilised world in general accepts the implications of a dual standard.

Women are expected to be chaste before marriage, and to be faithful after marriage, but what has been the social expectation concerning men? Flexner tells us in “ Prostitution in Europe ” (p. 110) “ Investigation shows that irregular sex intercourse on the part of the male is practically universal on the Continent,” and possibly some 50 per cent. of men between 16 and 45, even in this country, do not completely refrain from illicit relations with women, although such lapses may be infrequent. When we consider that the general social expectation applied to men is an expectation that they will go wrong in this matter the remarkable thing is that a considerable number of men do accept the compulsion of a high moral standard, and we believe that

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number is steadily increasing. Few things could be more encouraging or more hopeful for the future. But the fact remains that a very high standard of moral conduct is expected from women, whereas the lapses of men, provided no open scandal is caused, are regarded with little or no concern. This is the double standard.

### The Double Standard and Prostitution.

The double standard is the direct cause of the existence of the professional prostitute. It is impossible for all women to be virtuous until all men are virtuous. Since the majority of women *must* be kept chaste and the majority of men are not expected to be chaste, the situation obviously requires that the sexual lapses of a large number of men must be met by some women. The more rigidly chastity is enforced upon women the smaller is likely to be the number who openly fall away from it, and the less women there are willing to meet the irregular desires of men the more constant must be the prostitution of those who are willing. Hence has arisen the class of women known as "habitual" or "common" prostitutes. Upon these women has been concentrated the moral indignation of the world, and from time to time fanatical zeal has broken loose against them, and they have been persecuted with the greatest severity, tortured, branded, and whipped through the streets. But these outbursts of moral fervour expressed in periodic persecutions of prostitutes have never improved sexual morality. How could they? *A nation which accepts the double standard of morals must accept prostitutes. There is no other way of maintaining a double standard.* Of what moral value then is it to punish these women for being what they are?

### What are the Alternatives to the Double Standard?

The only alternatives are:—

- (a) A single low moral standard.
- (b) A single high moral standard.

In actual fact the double standard is already breaking down. The intensive campaign concerning the dangers and prevalence of venereal disease, together with a growing sensitiveness on the part of men to the cruelty and ugliness of cash-sale prostitution, have combined to turn many men away from the professional

prostitute, and have led them to form irregular unions of varying duration with women who are more their mental and social equals. Immorality is not necessarily increasing—it is probably less—but, instead of being concentrated on a comparatively few outcast women, it is now being spread over a much larger and a quite different class of women. This foreshadows the end of the double standard.

### Shall we Work for a Single High Standard or Accept a Single Low One?

We may choose to continue as at present: *i.e.*, demanding chastity from women and rather hopelessly hoping for it in men, but that state of affairs is already changing before our eyes. With the widespread knowledge now available of how to avoid the possible results of sex-relations women are in the same position of freedom from responsibility that men have hitherto held. They can live as they please, and for many of them the question of how they will live may be decided by the standards held by the men with whom they associate. It is, therefore, all-important that men should be educated to accept a single high standard of conduct in sex matters, and that society should expect from them the same clean living and the same freedom from "wild oats" that it expects from women. Only so can an equal high moral standard become a reality. On the whole, people tend to act up to what is expected of them. If we have a low expectation of conduct we are likely to get what we expect, and if we have a high one the probability is that people will try to live up to it. Let us then expect from men a stronger sense of responsibility in sexual matters and increased self-control, and there will assuredly be a splendid response. But if we are content to continue to accept the double standard the result is likely to be a gradual lowering of the woman's standard to meet that of men. Thus we shall come in time to the single low moral standard which can only be fraught with ultimate unhappiness and disaster to men and women alike.

### The Choice for the Future.

Let us then choose an equal high ideal for both men and women. Having chosen it let us act upon it. This means that we must challenge the double standard wherever it exists,



whether in law, social condemnation or in actual punishment. Let us cease persecuting the prostitute and concentrate on eliminating the demand for such women. Remember that it is futile to "rescue" one woman in order that her place may be taken by another as yet uncontaminated. The number of women who take part in prostitution is practically negligible compared to the number of men who take part in it. Why then concentrate on the woman? This does not mean that a higher morality will be achieved by treating men with the same cruelty we have meted out to women. It means that we should endeavour to bring men, *voluntarily*, under more exacting ideals by the quiet pressure of a strong public expectation of good conduct. The first and most important step is the education of public opinion until the single high standard is as widely accepted as the double standard is to-day. Educate by challenge.

We are not called upon to judge and to punish those who stumble on the difficult road. While many people are weak, few are morally vicious, and most normal human beings need encouragement rather than censure. Let us then be merciful to those who may not reach the ideal, but let us keep steadily before us, as our goal, a high and equal moral standard for both sexes, based on knowledge, self-control and a deepening of the sense of personal responsibility.

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