

CHAPTER I

AN ANALOGY

In every large city throughout the world thousands of women are so set aside as outcasts from decent society that it is considered an impropriety to speak the very word which designates them. Lecky calls this type of woman "the most mournful and the most awful figure in history": he says that "she remains, while creeds and civilizations rise and fall, the eternal sacrifice of humanity, blasted for the sins of the people." But evils so old that they are imbedded in man's earliest history have been known to sway before an enlightened public opinion and in the end to give way to a growing conscience, which regards them first as a moral affront and at length as an utter impossibility. Thus the generation just before us, our own fathers, uprooted, the enormous upas of slavery, "the tree that was literally as old as the race of man," although slavery doubtless had its beginnings in [end page 3] the captives of man's earliest warfare, even as this existing evil thus originated.

Those of us who think we discern the beginnings of a new conscience in regard to this twin of slavery, as old and outrageous as slavery itself and even more persistent, find a possible analogy between certain civic, philanthropic and educational efforts directed against the very existence of this social evil and similar organized efforts which preceded the overthrow of slavery in America. Thus, long before slavery was finally declared illegal, there were international regulations of its traffic, state and federal legislation concerning its extension, and many extra legal attempts to control its abuses; quite as we have the international regulations concerning the white slave traffic, the state and interstate legislation

for its repression, and an extra legal power in connection with it so universally given to the municipal police that the possession of this power has become one of the great sources of corruption in every American city.

Before society was ready to proceed against the institution of slavery as such, groups of men and women by means of the underground rail- [end page 4] road cherished and educated individual slaves; it is scarcely necessary to point out the similarity to the rescue homes and preventive associations which every great city contains.

It is always easy to overwork an analogy, and yet the economist who for years insisted that slave labor continually and arbitrarily limited the wages of free labor and was therefore a detriment to national wealth was a forerunner of the economist of today who points out the economic basis of the social evil, the connection between low wages and despair, between over-fatigue and the demand for reckless pleasure.

Before the American nation agreed to regard slavery as unjustifiable from the standpoint of public morality, an army of reformers, lecturers, and writers set forth its enormity in a never-ceasing flow of invective, of appeal, and of portrayal concerning the human cruelty to which the system lent itself. We can discern the scouts and outposts of a similar army advancing against this existing evil: the physicians and sanitarians who are committed to the task of ridding the race from contagious diseases, the teachers and lecturers who are appealing to the higher morality [end page 5] of thousands of young people; the growing literature, not only biological and didactic, but of a popular type more closely approaching "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

Throughout the agitation for the abolition of slavery in America, there were statesmen who gradually became convinced of the political and moral necessity of giving to the freedman the protection of the ballot. In this current agitation there

are at least a few men and women who would extend a greater social and political freedom to all women if only because domestic control has proved so ineffectual.

We may certainly take courage from the fact that our contemporaries are fired by social compassions and enthusiasms, to which even our immediate predecessors were indifferent. Such compunctions have ever manifested themselves in varying degrees of ardor through different groups in the same community. Thus among those who are newly aroused to action in regard to the social evil are many who would endeavor to regulate it and believe they can minimize its dangers, still larger numbers who would eliminate all trafficking of unwilling victims in connection [end page 6] with it, and yet others who believe that as a quasi-legal institution it may be absolutely abolished. Perhaps the analogy to the abolition of slavery is most striking in that these groups, in their varying points of view, are like those earlier associations which differed widely in regard to chattel slavery. Only the so-called extremists, in the first instance, stood for abolition and they were continually told that what they proposed was clearly impossible. The legal and commercial obstacles, bulked large, were placed before them and it was confidently asserted that the blame for the historic existence of slavery lay deep within human nature itself. Yet gradually all of these associations reached the point of view of the abolitionist and before the war was over even the most lukewarm unionist saw no other solution of the nation's difficulty. Some such gradual conversion to the point of view of abolition is the experience of every society or group of people who seriously face the difficulties and complications of the social evil. Certainly all the national organizations-the National Vigilance Committee, the American Purity Federation, the Alliance for the Suppression and [end page 7] Prevention of the White Slave Traffic and many others-stand for the final abolition of commercialized vice. Local vice commissions, such as the able one recently appointed in Chicago, although composed of members of varying, beliefs in regard to the possibility of control and regulation, united in the end in recommending a law enforcement looking towards final abolition. Even the most sceptical of Chicago citizens, after reading the fearless document, shared the hope of the commission that "the city,

when aroused to the truth, would instantly rebel against the social evil in all its phases." A similar recommendation of ultimate abolition was recently made unanimous by the Minneapolis vice commission after the conversion of many of its members. Doubtless all of the national societies have before them a task only less gigantic than that faced by those earlier associations in America for the suppression of slavery, although it may be legitimate to remind them that the best-known antislavery society in America was organized by the New England abolitionists in 1836, and only thirty-six years later, in 1872, was formally disbanded because its object had been accomplished. [end page 8] The long struggle ahead of these newer associations will doubtless claim its martyrs and its heroes, has indeed already claimed them during the last thirty years. Few righteous causes have escaped baptism with blood; nevertheless, to paraphrase Lincoln's speech, if blood were exacted drop by drop in measure to the tears of anguished mothers and enslaved girls, the nation would still be obliged to go into the struggle.

Throughout this volume the phrase "social evil" is used to designate the sexual commerce permitted to exist in every large city, usually in a segregated district, wherein the chastity of women is bought and sold. Modifications of legal codes regarding marriage and divorce, moral judgments concerning the entire group of questions centring about illicit affection between men and women, are quite other questions which are not considered here. Such problems must always remain distinct from those of commercialized vice, as must the treatment of an irreducible minimum of prostitution, which will doubtless long exist, quite as society still retains an irreducible minimum of murders. This volume does not deal with the probable future of [end page 9] prostitution, and gives only such historical background as is necessary to understand the present situation. It endeavors to present the contributory causes, as they have become registered in my consciousness through a long residence in a crowded city quarter, and to state the indications, as I have seen them, of a Dew conscience with its many and varied manifestations.

Nothing is gained by making the situation better or worse than it is, nor in anywise different from what it is. This ancient evil is indeed social in the sense of community responsibility and can only be understood and at length remedied when we face the fact and measure the resources which may at length be massed against it. Perhaps the most striking indication that our generation has become the bearer of a new moral consciousness in regard to the existence of commercialized vice is the fact that the mere contemplation of it throws the more sensitive men and women among our contemporaries into a state of indignant revolt. It is doubtless an instinctive shrinking from this emotion and an unconscious dread that this modern sensitiveness will be outraged, which justifies to themselves so many moral men and [end page 10] women in their persistent ignorance of the subject. Yet one of the most obvious resources at our command, which might well be utilized at once, if it is to be utilized at all, is the overwhelming pity and sense of protection which the recent revelations in the white slave traffic have aroused for the thousands of young girls, many of them still children, who are yearly sacrificed to the "sins of the people." All of this emotion ought to be made of value, for quite as a state of emotion is invariably the organic preparation for action, so it is certainly true that no profound spiritual transformation can take place without it. After all, human progress is deeply indebted to a study of imperfections, and the counsels of despair, if not full of seasoned wisdom, are at least fertile in suggestion and a desperate spur to action. Sympathetic knowledge is the only way of approach to any human problem, and the line of least resistance into the jungle of human wretchedness must always be through that region which is most thoroughly explored, not only by the information of the statistician, but by sympathetic understanding. We are daily attaining the latter through such authors as Sudermann and [end page 11] Elsa Gerusalem, who have enabled their readers to comprehend the so-called "fallen" woman through a skilful portrayal of the reaction of experience upon personality. Their realism has rescued her from the sentimentality surrounding an impossible Camille quite as their fellow-crafts-men in realism have replaced the weeping Amelias of the Victorian period by reasonable women transcribed from actual life.

The treatment of this subject in American literature is at present in the pamphleteering stage, although an ever-increasing number of short stories and novels deal with it. On the other hand, the plays through which Bernard Shaw constantly places the truth before the public in England as Brieux is doing for the public in France, produce in the spectators a disquieting sense that society is involved in commercialized vice and must speedily find a way out. Such writing is like the roll of the drum which announces the approach of the troops ready for action. Some of the writers who are performing this valiant service are related to those great artists who in every age enter into a long struggle with existing social conditions, until after many years [end page 12] they change the outlook upon life for at least a handful of their contemporaries. Their readers find themselves no longer mere bewildered spectators of a given social wrong, but have become conscious of their own hypocrisy in regard to it, and they realize that a veritable horror, simply because it was hidden, had come to seem to them inevitable and almost normal.

Many traces of this first uneasy consciousness regarding the social evil are found in contemporary literature, for while the business of literature is revelation and not reformation, it may yet perform for the men and women now living that purification of the imagination and intellect which the Greeks believed to come through pity and terror.

Secure in the knowledge of evolutionary processes, we have learned, to talk glibly of the obligations of race progress and of the possibility of racial degeneration. In this respect certainly we have a wider outlook than that possessed by our fathers, who so valiantly grappled with chattel slavery and secured its overthrow. May the new conscience gather force until men and women, acting under its sway, shall be constrained to eradicate this ancient evil! [end page 13]