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Virtuosi of Virtue

Under cover of the war the professional suppressors of vice in all parts of the United States are having the time of their lives. The theory behind their wholesale snouting and snorting is that they are protecting the pure young soldier from the scarlet lady; the actual fact is that nine-tenths of them, in war as in peace, care a good deal less for the pure young soldiers or even for the pure young working girl, than for the fun that goes with the chase.

In other words, they pursue their pious jihad as a sport, and it is, of all sports, the one that has the most ardent fascination for a certain type of man. I need not describe that type too particularly; you are doubtless familiar with it. Its salient mark is a persistence of the disquieting curiosities of adolescence into maturity, and sometimes into senility. The normal vice crusader, in brief, is a fellow with an unhealthy interest in forbidden things—an interest which, at its mildest, makes him nothing worse than a somewhat ridiculous snooper and slummer, but which, at its worst, presents a picture belonging frankly to psychopathology.

This pornographic obsession, of course, is not the monopoly of actual vice crusaders. One finds it, too, in elderly gentlemen of a more mellow and expansive type—and one finds the gentlemen themselves at all the new leg shows, and eyeing the passing fair from club windows, and prowling experimentally through the big stores. To make an authentic vice crusader, a strong flavor of Puritanism must be added—and Puritanism, unluckily, is a commodity which these states never go short of. Given the combination and the show is ready. He who has it in his bosom will find his naughty girls infallibly, and having found them he will pursue them with a deafening din of shawns and psalteries, and so force rectitude upon a reluctant and cynical world.

One reason why we Americans are so often belabored by the yells and gyrations of such fellows probably lies in the curious cut of our police laws. The continental European hands over such matters to the regular police. He believes that, all things considered, they are more competent to deal with prostitution and its allied evils than any other group of men, and, what is more, that they are just as apt to do it honestly. But our own theory is, first, that the police are not to be trusted with too much power, and, secondly, that the power they actually have is seldom exercised either intelligently or honestly, and so we have created a lot of auxiliary agencies, legal and extra-legal, to do what they fail to do, and in particular to keep them from doing what they ought not to do.

Every American city swarms with such agencies—law and order societies, reform leagues, vigilance associations, and others after their kind. Their organization, with few exceptions, follows a general model. They are composed, on the one hand, of a small group of professional informers and persecutors, who keep the show going for a living, and, on the other, of a small group of well to do moral entrepreneurs—that is, of a small group of gentlemen, usually of advanced years, who like that sort of sport and are willing to pay a good price for it.

It is such appetizing combinations of gunner and beater that keep alive that unhealthy public interest in the ways and means of prostitution which is so plainly visible in the average American city. Their raids and forays make good copy for the newspapers, and their endless attacks upon the police make even better copy. Hence they find it easy to get endless publicity for their enterprises, and soon or late this publicity converts itself into some measure of public support. Hundreds are stirred up to a passionate yearning to put down sin; thousands are agreeably entertained by the show. The result after awhile is a secure position. The vice crusaders take on the quality of public officials and exercise the police power without any regard for the regular police, and even in opposition to them.

In all American cities, in truth, combats between these virtuosi of virtue and the police are regular features of the communal life and do much to relieve the tedium of the domestic hearth. A study of the available statistics shows, in the average city of more than 100,000 population, such a joust is pulled off every seven years. First the scoundrelism of the police is denounced and the enormous prosperity of vice under their shifty eyes is melodramatically exposed. Then the ladies of joy are chased out, their flaunting dens are closed, half a dozen cops are broken, and it is solemnly announced that the town has been cleaned up. Then a new outfit of inspectors and captains is installed, the vice crusaders retire to reform their lines—and the whole process begins all over again.

If anything valuable and permanent were accomplished by this perennial hocus-pocus the judicious, perhaps, might be inclined to view it benignantly. It is lawful, I dare say, to fight the devil with any weapon that happens to be handy. But the truth is that all the wild performances that have been going on throughout the country for the last twenty years have accomplished little if anything, and that the problem of prostitution is still as far from solution as it was in the days of Maria Theresa. In very small towns, perhaps, vice crusading has sometimes worked—at least to the extent of eliminating the professional prostitute—but in the big cities all it has done has been to change the form of the evil and to make it even more elusive and baffling than it was before.

This, of course, is always denied by the gentlemen who make a living at the business, and they can always find impressionable sentimentalists to bear them out, but the facts are the facts, and it is usually not difficult to dredge them up. In more than one place, indeed, the so called cleaning up of a town has made it a far worse shambles than it was before. This is plainly visible in London, to avoid an embarrassing American example. London, theoretically, has been rid of legalized prostitution for years, and yet the city swarms with prostitutes, and the police, to keep them in order, have had to subject them to a sort of rough segregation—unlawful, but absolutely necessary.

Aside from its intrinsic futility this orgiastic vice crusading by professional purists presents many positive evils. One is the propagation of extravagant and idiotic notions as to the prevalence of vice and of even worse errors about its machinery. The white slave craze of half a dozen years ago offers an example. The promoters of that madness convinced the majority of Americans, perhaps, that most of the women engaged in prostitution had been brought to their plight by force and were held against their will. As a result new and drastic laws against alleged white slave traders were passed in most of the states, and the federal government helped along the business by adopting the Mann Act.

The truth is that nine-tenths of this gabble was mere buncombe. The prostitute who is held in bondage, even the lightest, is so rare as to be a curiosity; very few policemen or

magistrates have ever seen one. And the young girl who is kidnapped to be sold into slavery is rare still; she exists, in the main, only in the imagination of vice crusaders and newspaper reporters. The Mann Act, ostensibly designed to put down such imaginary kidnappings, has actually had a quite different effect. That is to say, it has made blackmail so easy and so profitable a business that various felonious pleasantries of an earlier day, notably the badger game and the panel game, have been well nigh stamped out by the new competition.

Another bad effect of emotional crusading is that it makes the police cynical and rebellious. No one knows better than they do how little sense or honesty there is in the periodical outbreaks of the crusaders, and no one knows better how impossible it is to meet the assaults that are made upon them. As a result, they acquire a deep seated animosity to the whole crusading fraternity, and that animosity tends to convert itself into opposition to the underlying effort at reform, on its good side as well as on its bad. Thus clean-up campaigns, even when they are aimed at abuses so gross that some chance of ameliorating them is possible, commonly get but small help from the cops, and that little is given grudgingly.

But worst of all, vice crusading arouses a morbid and artificial interest in vice and tends to make it appear a gaudy and fascinating thing. The crusaders, seeking self-advertisement, get it not only for themselves, but also for the business they ostensibly combat. Their wild tales of carnality fill the newspapers. They point to specific people and places. They give the sordid attractions of the red light district all the charms of a circus. They feed the curiosity of adolescence with meats that are anything but nourishing. The result is that an avid and ignorant public attention is fixed feverishly upon a matter that is of least danger when it is least apparent.

By such means, it must be obvious, nothing of ponderable value will ever be accomplished. The whole net effect of vice crusading in the United States on the side of public good may be represented by zero. Scores of noisy crusaders have been maintained by the business, and an unhealthy show has been kept up, but prostitution still goes on. What is worse, a sober inquiry into its causes and into practical means of reducing it has been made almost impossible by the oceans of false information and idiotic conclusion emitted by self-constituted experts, and all chances of success in the war upon the so-called social disease have been set back years.

Those disease will never be diminished by roaring and posturing. They will be diminished, when the time comes, by the unsentimental application of scientific methods—and moral frenzies stand in direct opposition to everything that is methodical and sane, and everything that is efficacious and scientific.