

The SEMI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE SECTION

A Magazine for your Reading Table

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS' PAGE



In the last analysis, a monopoly of virtue must be denied to our ancestors who prided themselves on their Puritan code of morals and usages — they were merely less well-informed and more selfish than the present generation. Believing that we are witnessing the break-down of the old Puritanism in America, I nevertheless assert that this is one of the most truly moral ages that the world has ever known. The alarmists who see black portents in the growing frankness with which men and women talk about the hitherto unmentionable problems of society, are misreading the signs of the times. The modern American is not degenerate; he is unafraid, even to the point of smashing hoary fetiches when they stand in the way of progress.

What, after all, was the Puritanism that, finding expression in the laws of New England and the creeds of the early American churches, became established as the customs of the people? If one should go behind customs and ask for the cause of their being, it would be found in the idea prevalent at the time that strict living for the individual was a guarantee of his personal glory and reward. This represented an extremely refined form of selfishness, for we can not get away from the fact that if a man was good according to the definitions of that day, he could count on receiving honor at the hands of his neighbors as well as the rewards of immortality.

One hundred years has brought an utter change in the point of view. Among those who think most inclusively, the life of most value is no longer the one which represents virtue in itself, but the one which represents social virtue. We feel that there is something ignoble in seeking personal salvation, if one does not also enlist in the ranks of those who are seeking the material as well as the spiritual salvation of humanity.

To be specific: one of the obsolete blue laws of Connecticut forbade a man to kiss his wife on Sunday. That seems ridiculous to our modern notions. We are beginning to suspect that it might be a good thing to modify Sabbath observance laws still further, and allow men who are penned up in offices and factories through the week to take their wives out into the pure air and sunshine on Sunday. In other words, the modern tendency is against suppressing the normal and wholesome impulses of the human being, in order to conform to a too rigid personal code. The blue law brand of Puritanism has gone forever, but upon its ruins is building a new morality that is higher and more useful, that is going to make the world a better place to live in.

Considering this question, one can not afford to overlook those forms of popular art which have been severely criticised of late. I have particularly in mind what are known as the sex novel and the sex drama, and do not hesi-



THE NEW PURITANISM

By Carrie Chapman Catt

President, International Woman Suffrage Alliance

tate to say that a book or play in which sex is handled in a serious spirit can do harm to the community only if it is inaccurate. Nothing is to be gained by suppressing facts. The reformers of today are seeking for more and more knowledge, and they can not afford to turn their backs upon any writer who speaks out cleanly and honestly. Of course, there is the danger of mistaking liberty for license, but those who stray in that direction are few compared with those who are strengthened by a wider knowledge of the facts of existence. Within the past generation, a tremendous influence has been exerted in Europe by a group of well known authors. Among these may be named George Brandes, who has presented the idea of free love in a very refined and inviting manner; Ellen Key, the famous Swede, who followed with the theory that love is the highest manifestation of individual destiny; and Nietzsche with his doctrine of absolute individualism. They have been followed by a host of less noteworthy men and women, and as a result of this form of education, many young men and women especially in Europe — writers, artists and professional people for the most part — are attempting to apply these teachings to everyday life.

This infection has crossed the Atlantic, and we hear rumors of a movement to make people soul free, the theorists overlooking the fact that no one can be soul free who is not master of all his emotions.

It is these manifestations which have led many clergymen, pious laymen and pessimistic moralists to lament the passing of Puritanism.

But they are manifestations only, mere side issues of the great world movement that has made them possible. Nature never goes backward. Morals mean civilization, and morals are not going to be lost.

The sudden appearance of books and plays which picture graphically the moral conditions of the present time are symptoms of a fundamental change in public thought. We refuse longer to believe that ignorance of evil is a protection to any girl or young man. Such dramas as *Damaged Goods* by Brioux do an immense amount of good. Even the two plays which were expurgated recently by the New York police, because each had a scene laid in a brothel, set the community thinking by the shock which they created. Only by shocking some people can they be made to think.

As much may be said for novels of a similar type, such as *The House of Bondage*, and for sundry recent books dealing with *White Slavery*, so called.

The efforts of the sincere, if revolutionary, authors of today should bear fruit in a higher standard of public morals. They will hasten the advent of a new and better Puritanism, which manifesting itself in a social form, will be free of the bigotry and individual selfishness of the old.

Carrie Chapman Catt

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