

Ostracized Sisters of the Streets

Reflect Our Guilt

(July 16, 1913)

There is but one thing remarkable about opening our home to an unfortunate young woman and that is that anyone should consider it remarkable.¹ This fact is significant. Persecution of these unfortunate girls is the rule and so common that it attracts no attention. Kindness is so exceptional that it provokes widespread comment.

The sisters of the streets but reflect our own guilt and shame and the cruelty of hypocrisy of the society which produces them. Their male partners in sin go free. They alone bear the disgrace and sorrow, the ostracism and living death. They are driven to prostitution, persecuted and preyed upon by the police, and every species of graft and blackmail are levied to rob them of the proceeds of their dishonor and shame.

Every scarlet woman in the daylight is a living certificate of the Christian church's denial of Jesus Christ. He did not scorn and banish the erring sister. He loved and pitied her, gave her new life and new hope, and rebuked without mercy the pious, heartless hypocrite guilty of her persecution.

Jesus at the home of Simon the Pharisee, where the sinful woman followed him, turned in contempt from his church attending host to pour out his heart in compassion to the unwelcome intruder.²

No man who refuses to open his home and his heart to an unfortunate and persecuted woman is a follower of Jesus Christ. He may cry "Lord, Lord," but he is a hypocrite.

The red light district is a direct challenge to the Christian church. What Christ would do is proved by what he did when on earth and for which extortioners and hypocrites, led by high priests, all of whom said long prayers and made great show of religious pretense, conspired to have him ignominiously crucified as a felon.

The church of today is no less full of hypocrisy and false pretenses, It does not rebuke rich hypocrites and pour out its love for poor sinners, as the Christ did, whom it falsely professes to follow.

There is a deep underlying cause for the scarlet scourge of modern society. Tremendous forces are at work recruiting the countless army of sinful women and until this cause is removed and these forces turned into constructive instead of destructive purposes, society will be compelled to

pay the increasingly dreadful penalties. In the meantime the very least we can do is to treat the unfortunate sisters with the same consideration that we do other afflicted and suffering human beings.

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¹ Early in July 1913 Gene and Marguerite Debs rescued one Helen Cox from the Terre Haute city jail, where she was being held on a prostitution charge. Cox, the daughter of a Methodist clergyman, had eloped with the son of a prominent family but was later divorced and lost her child. The Debs family rescued Cox after three days in jail and were allowed to take her into their home to live under supervision. Debs issued a public statement at the time declaring, “This girl has been persecuted. Will Terre Haute help her, or will its organized force be used to drive her to desperation? The police have told her that she must keep off the streets or go to the red light district. Do the police mean to get recruits for the red light district. It is time for this pitiless cruelty to stop. Why not war on the immoral people in high life instead of persecuting this penniless girl?” (See: “Debs Gives Girl Outcast a Home,” unspecified Terre Haute newspaper, circa July 6, 1913, copy on *Papers of Eugene V. Debs* microfilm edition, reel 10.) The story garnered national attention.

² The story of Jesus and the “woman in the city, which was a sinner” is told in *Luke* 7:36-50.