IN DEFENSE OF VIRTUE

By Margaret Widdemer

I READ a book review yesterday. It seemed to be quite in earnest. And this is what it said:

> This book abounds in beautiful sentiments, beautifully expressed. Its moral tone is undeniably good. We take pleasure in commending it to the public.

It was a big authoritative paper which said this, and of quite a well known author: Whyte-Melville, to be exact. . . . But you have never heard of Whyte-Melville? Naturally. He wrote about forty years ago; for those days he was a best seller. And forty years ago (for this book review was that old) the way to push a book was apparently to extol unashamedly its capacity for making people better. Moral tone! One can scarcely use the phrase seriously today. The mid-Victorians, armored, it may be, by their sheltering hoops and whiskers—for costume has much to do with the soul—were unashamed, however, in their approval of morality. Their bravery seems terrifying from the viewpoint of today. Who would dare, reviewing a book this year, to suggest as a point in its favor that it might make people better to read it? Not thus are books reviewed now by the intelligentsia!

I was interested, on behalf of the Whyte-Melville book's reviewer, to see if I could find in any conservative comment of today an approach to the same point of view. Presently I thought I had run my quarry to earth. There was such a tone of injured morality in a page review I came across.

It was one of the season's serious books. The reviewer liked it, he said. But he couldn't conceal that he was hurt, terribly, terribly hurt, by the wrongness of its ending, and — I believe — the bad influence it would have on the young who read it. It was about a man who married a woman whom he discovered to be not so congenial as a lady later met. He thought about it for a great many chapters; then he fell — for instead of eloping with the lady, he went back to live with his wife as decently and dutifully as he could.

He didn't want to, but he thought he ought. And the reviewer nearly cried.

"Paul", the reviewer said bitterly, "should have gone with Marian to California." And he went on to explain why. "These yearnings", said he, "of a Main Street man" (by which he conveyed, I suppose, that Paul wasn't really much good, merely a representative decent American citizen), "such as they are, represent the stress and drive toward freedom, toward leisure, toward light."

In other words, we were taught that if Paul had thrown away his reputation, his right mindedness, and his sense of responsibility, and, abandoning his wife because she wasn't exciting, departed for freedom, leisure, and light in a Hollywood bungalow, he would have made a fine trade. That he would have had to break his word to his wife, to society, to life as a whole — that he would have dropped into complete dishonor — apparently didn't count alongside the commodities he missed. You felt like writing an agonized letter to Paul and begging him to be his better self and elope with the lady. You were, along with the earnest reviewer, really shocked at decency.

It seems to me that the liberals are too hard on us. Decency may be a deplorable taste, but why not be broad about it? Why not give the poor addict of right mindedness a chance? He was probably steeped in a sense of duty when he was too young to know any better, and can't shake off the curse of early training. It never occurs to the exponents of self expression that it might be considered just as narrowing to be shocked at decency as it was for those mid-Victorians whose names they curse to be shocked at *in*decency. And this short sightedness, one is constrained to say, is far from fair to the decent of today: gentle, unobtrusive, even cowed souls as they generally are.

My own viewpoint, I suppose it might be said, is one of undue prejudice against the Immoral. But it was not always thus. In youth I had the proper attitude, acquired in the proper way from the tone of all my reading matter. I held the conventional belief in the general impossibleness of the decent. The hypocritical deacons, the dissembling pietists, the catty, backbiting small town Aid Societies — I lived in the midst of them all and saw them at their nefarious worst. And I looked forward to the day when I should meet Real People; the royal, the generous, the honorable Immoral. Those high hearted thieves out of Bret Harte! Those strong and pure Unfortunate Sisters whom everybody from Hawthorne down to Service acclaimed as superior in all ways to wretched keepers of the strait path! Those sad, magnanimous forgers; those O. Henry confidence men, so called, one felt, for scarcely any other reason but that you could put more confidence in them than in Mr. Gladstone or Benjamin Franklin! To mingle with a few of these would, I knew, be widening, uplifting; I should be ennobled from a mere day or so of association with them; if they would stoop to associate, that is, with so unvile a worm as I.

I shall never forget my first disillusionment. It came through meeting a drunkard. Not that I minded his particular vice — that, indeed, was his recommendation. But I had naturally supposed that it was a practical certificate of generosities; that a nobler — if more alcoholically enlarged — heart never beat beneath a pocket flask. And he borrowed six dollars of me — I was a girl of fifteen — and never paid it back.

Still I hoped on. There were other crimes; any amount of Thou Shalt Nots that I might see hurdled. Thieves, for instance, driven to their profession by an injurious world which should have been standing in the dock, as I had frequently read and heard, in their place. Alas, the first thief who came my way put undue pressure on my principles, because it was *my* silk stockings — my first pair — that she took. To my credit be it said, I tried hard to believe that she did it for a dying mother. Only a long struggle with the facts convinced me that no dying mother, but a plain fondness for stockings, had nerved her; and that furthermore she had as slanderous a tongue about all the people who *might* have stolen, and quite as petty and catty a viewpoint about everybody but her beau of the moment, as the oldest member of the Ladies' Aid!

In a small town an anxious inquirer usually has a chance of hearing and seeing something of most kinds of wrongdoing. Soon a forger came my way; my father, the pastor of the parish, was trying to reform him. He never succeeded, because that forger enjoyed his work. What was more, he forged, not because he was a too loving husband with a too extravagant wife or daughter, but because it was easier than working. Every time he was got off, or let out, as the case might be, he would forge some more. It ruined his father and killed his mother; but he didn't much care.

I have a hopeful heart. It took more than he to convince me, but eventually cold facts made me give up my early idealism. People who break the laws of civilization and decency — our present childlike faith to the contrary — are *not* kinder, broader, fairer, nor better sports than those who keep them. They just earnestly think they are, and tell us so till we are convinced. And we, trusting souls, are convinced to the point of being cowed! We would rather be broad than president. We also fear that if we are narrow they will make fun of us.

My personal pride of devilishness was blighted, I suppose, in early childhood by just the opposite course. I was laughed at if I tried to be bad. I lay all my incapacity to be one with the present age to a fatal ballad of childhood known as "The Robber Kitten", which began:

A Kitten once to his Mother said,
  I'll never more be good—
I'll go and be a Robber fierce
  And live in a dreary Wood, Wood, Wood,
And live in a dreary Wood!

Whenever we were show off naughty, in those irrevocably impressionable years, somebody was sure to chant those words. And ever since then, when I have longed to be really shocking, that song, with its accompanying picture of a small and fluffy pussy cat attempting to impress the world as a Robber fierce, has floated up before my memory (or if it hasn't floated somebody has floated it) and all has been over. By the time I found Freud (one finds Freud, you know, as one used to find God), it was too late. Even his backing as to the necessity of an occasional crime by way of self expression could not erase the futility of trying to be devilish, and succeeding in being no more than a Robber Kitten, from my consciousness.

It makes life hard sometimes; for I stray about a world where Robber Kittens in people's early training seem to have been few. There is a far too large crowd of youthful radicals who don't in the least know that it is possible for their privileged class to make fools of themselves. Only a little while ago one ruined an evening for a

whole dinner party of us. He was one of those young artists who do Aubrey Beardsley and water; only they are hurt if you call it water. They hope it is prussic acid. The boy appeared with a portfolio under his arm which he informed us contained a full set of the Deadly Sins. He had just drawn them all, himself, from personal experience. He did not look as if he had had time; but one must be charitable. There were the Borgias, who used to start sinning, according to the history books, at ten or eleven.

They were not what I should have called really satisfying sins. Gluttony, perhaps, was most like a picture, for it is hard to be properly Futurist about such an honest thing as overeating; and his glutton looked so like Capital in the cartoons that you missed his mate, Labor, in his paper cap and manly purity. The rest were just wiggly things, not even good from a Futurist viewpoint. Or so one, who was present, said afterward. But the pale youth stood above them, half weeping, half furious, until the good hearted hostess ran about whispering imploringly, "We *must* praise poor Jimmy! He was *so* hurt the other night because somebody suggested that he sell his 'Dream of Nero' to 'The Christian Herald' for a cover. He'd meant it to be so pagan."

So, cowed, we praised Jimmy till he produced a masterpiece; his Soul, the way he thought it looked. He seemed to me, for the first time, hard on himself; for the Soul was an elongated lady clad in a pair of wristlets and a fur boa which, however, were states of mind, not attempts at protection from the weather.

"My doctor", boasted the child, stimulated by our false admiration, "says I have the rottenest mind he ever saw!"

"Oh, Jimmy", purred the tactful hostess. "You *are* so cynical!"

Nobody even seemed to dare think it was funny. For my part I yearned, preferably, for Mr. Pecksniff. He was at least imitating being good. This poor little lad was imitating being bad — which is by so much the worse. Imitation decency is better than imitation indecency. But I could not even say so, because curiously few people seem to know about the immortal Pecksniff any more; he was created before Shaw, which is nowadays very much like B. C.

But it is not alone the Robber Kittens of today who feel that it is shocking not to be shocking — or broad, to use the word which most devastatingly cows the conscientious. I remember three sweet spinsters whom I met on a summer vacation. Sweet, but, alas, earnestly and uncomfortably "free". I went in bathing with them on the lake; they were clad in one piece bathing suits with decorous skirts above. They went into the water — it was a sheltered and semi private cove — till they were up to their necks. Then they briskly pulled off the one piece bathing suits and swam around and around, splashing each other like the Rhine Maidens, and pantingly explaining to me that they felt "so free!" Whenever a motor boat was heard they grabbed the bathing suits off the gunwale of our canoe, and crawled painfully into them.

Meanwhile, the dear souls labored with me, reversed missionaries, because I was too narrow — as they gently but clearly said — to leap in and out of a wet suit. My explanation that it was not I, but the suit, which seemed to me too narrow for the task, they simply considered flippant. One so often is accused of flippancy when one is merely stating a fact.

This particular point — costume in the water — is, apparently, one of the high points of narrowness or broadness. For I can also recall a set of still more earnest parents, looking troubled even to grief, as they watched a six year old daughter in the bay.

"Marjorie is showing self consciousness!" they wailed. "She wants to wear her suit in the water!"

And I know that if I had tried to tell these broad souls that bathing suits are not a touchstone of standards one way or the other, they would simply have told me once more that I was flippant. Or they might have thought me uttering a New Gospel. And that would have been worse.

Just before the war, a thousand years ago or so as it seems now, I can remember an attitude on the part of many people to the effect that there was nothing wrong *but* intolerance. It was a part of the wave of reform which died when the war broke out; an attitude very like that of the old lady who was so charitable that she never mentioned the devil except to admire him for his persistence. Intolerance is of course very wrong still. But at least there always were and always will be certain things which should not be tolerated, and to believe this now is to be considered — stop to think a moment — narrow, if not ridiculous. For the all-tolerance, the feeling of 1913 which W. S. Gilbert expressed once and for all in "The Pirates of Penzance" —

When a felon's not engaged in his employment
Or maturing his felonious little plans,
His capacity for innocent enjoyment
Is just as great as any honest man's . . .
When the coster's finished jumping on his mother
He loves to lie a-basking in the sun . . .

— this tearfully romantic attitude toward the wrongdoer, has been followed by a very natural intolerance of right doing. The coster, allowed in consideration of his fondness for the beauties of nature metaphorically to jump on his mother unrebuked — nay, commiserated — has risen up and, taking the upper hand with a strength rising from long exercise on his mother's frame, decreed that nothing shall be tolerated but this form of exercise. And all manner of good and kind and right minded people, cowed by the bogy of Narrowness, bow their heads.

There are, to be sure, certain chartered libertines of decency still. Toward a Jew's Judaism, a Christian Scientist's practice of his faith, a Catholic's observance of his creed, one may maintain a courtesy even to the point of weary admiration. They are allowed, in the names of their several faiths, any eccentricity in the way of virtue they desire. But if one is outside of these folds one is helpless. . . . And this suggests a thought.

Can it be that if those of us who are not Jews, Scientists, or Catholics were to stiffen a little, as these do, when our code is assailed; if we were even to rise up and hit the bullying coster of Unmorality over his head, hard and intolerantly and inexcusably; can it be that our cause would be won, and we freed to be, unblamed, as frankly right minded as in other days?