

**DOWNWARD PATHS, AN
INQUIRY INTO THE CAUSES
WHICH CONTRIBUTE TO THE
MAKING OF THE PROSTITUTE**

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Downward paths, an inquiry into the causes which contribute to the making of the prostitute by
A. Maude Royden

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A. MAUDE ROYDEN

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5122 PRESENTATION

DOWNWARD PATHS

AN INQUIRY INTO THE CAUSES
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WITH A FOREWORD BY
A. MAUDE ROYDEN

Prostitute



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FOREWORD

THIS little book is published under a Trust, and the several writers who have contributed to produce it desire that their names should remain unknown. They are women who, realising that knowledge is the first need of the reformer, have sought at least to make a beginning, and to study the conditions of a great and terrible problem which society must ultimately attempt to solve. They have done so without deciding beforehand what they were going to find ; and this intellectual detachment constitutes the value of the book. For the question of moral reform—and especially of reform in matters of sex-relationship—has too often been approached in a very different spirit. It is one on which those who feel at all are apt to feel so strongly that the detachment of mind necessary to the true enquirer becomes impossible. They seek to prove a case rather than to acquire knowledge, and knowledge is sought only to support their proof. Consequently, when public opinion becomes ripe for some advance, however small, no body of reliable information exists, by which reform may be guided ; and the impulse is lost. The recent agitation in favour of the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1912) was a case in point. Here, under a genuine impulse of humanity, created largely by the Woman's Movement with its growing sense of the solidarity and mutual responsibility of women, public opinion demanded

that " something should be done " to suppress the traffic in women and girls for the purposes of prostitution. But the good intentions of the man (and woman) in the street were equalled or even surpassed by his profound ignorance of the problem with which he proposed to deal. Incredible and even grotesque stories were told and believed on the slenderest authority, or on no authority at all. The only demand was that they should be sufficiently frightful. Newspapers and bookstalls were deluged with articles, pamphlets, and books narrating horrors and proposing remedies as preposterous—and sometimes as horrible—as the disease. The revival of the Contagious Diseases Acts was openly advocated by writers who were apparently ignorant that these Acts had proved a sanitary failure, and who were feverishly anxious to make some " practical " suggestion. This is not the spirit in which to approach a difficult and complicated problem, and in the course of time, many stories having been shown to be without foundation in fact, incredulity took the place of credulity, and public interest in an urgent problem which little had been done to solve, rapidly evaporated.

The Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases has, it is true, been at work in a more sober and scientific spirit, on another side of the same problem. Unfortunately, it generally happens that the public interest which demanded the appointment of a Commission easily believes that no more remains to be done, and when (generally after a long interval) the report appears, there is no more interest in the matter, and none of that insistent demand which alone can secure action. Foreseeing this danger, a Council for Combating Venereal Diseases has been formed to sustain and educate public interest in the questions under discussion, in the hope that when action again becomes possible, there will be

an enlightened body of opinion to guide and support it. The need for such education has been enormously increased by the War. All who have any knowledge at all of the history of venereal diseases know that the number of cases of illness takes a terrible leap upward after a war. Already people are growing uneasy, and as at the time of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, but now with greater urgency and show of reason, the demand is made for a revival of the Contagious Diseases Acts, or some such administrative measures as created the *police des mœurs* in France.* To those who know how utterly useless these measures have already proved from a hygienic point of view, the need for more accurate information as to the causes of prostitution becomes visibly more urgent. They are aware how readily (and how fruitlessly) the average mind turns to the suppression of the result—venereal disease—and how ignorant most of us are about the cause—prostitution. The question then immediately arises—what is the cause of this cause? What makes women prostitute themselves? Why is a trade so dangerous to health, so unprotected by law or custom, so universally condemned by public opinion, always supplied? What are the motives which bring women into it? These are the questions to which we must turn our attention before we can hope to solve "the social problem."

Panic legislation, such as is already being demanded, and may be demanded with much greater insistence later on, is no remedy. It is apt rather to increase than

* Since the above was written, the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases has reported, and has, without a single dissentient, condemned the system once set up in this country by the Contagious Diseases Acts. There are, however, only too many less enlightened people who still desire to see their re-enactment. The Report of the Royal Commission will be a powerful weapon indeed against such demands.

to lessen the evil. It is from enquiries like those made by the authors of *Downward Paths* that we may hope for light enough to proceed to wise reform.

The value of the studies collected here lies in the fact that, though they admittedly cover but a small part of the ground, and are too few in number for generalisation, they have at least been made by enquirers who had no case to prove, but sought solely for enlightenment. We have in this country nothing like the great body of evidence collected by the different Vice-Commissions in America, though a beginning in this direction is being made. This little book, small as it is, has its place in the independent investigation of facts which remains to be made on a much larger scale. Its authors have fixed their attention on causes rather than results.

One aspect of this problem is brought home to us with great urgency even by the comparatively small number of cases here studied and set down, and its gravity is accentuated by the wide professional experience of at least one of the authors as to the effect of social conditions on the mental and physical health of girls: the nature of our social responsibility for the outcast. The chapters on economic pressure and the effect of early influences are specially enlightening on this point. It is astonishing to find experts denying the element of economic pressure as a factor in the creation of the prostitute. It is an influence constantly present, and it is only when we interpret it to mean actual physical starvation, that we can say it is rarely the determining factor. "Economic pressure" does not begin with starvation: it ends there. There has gone before, the long strain of under-feeding and overwork, of the absence of interest, variety, and colour, and all that makes life worth living to a human being. Poverty often means isolation, and isolation the absence of all those ties which

keep us in our place in the social order, and make it worth while to preserve our self-respect. To be without these is to be constantly in danger, and it is economic pressure which has thrust many over the brink of the precipice, though few would say their fall was due to actual starvation.

Intimately connected with this aspect of the question is that of home and housing, especially of the child. The age at which children are first corrupted is almost incredibly early until we consider the nature of the surroundings in which they grow up. Insufficient space, overcrowding, the herding together of all ages and both sexes ; these things break down the barriers of a natural modesty and reserve. Where decency is practically impossible, unchastity will follow, and follow almost as a matter of course. There are certain natural defences in the right instincts of young people brought up in the right kind of home, which we look for in vain among those who have never had space enough for growth or privacy enough for refinement.

In such sordid circumstances, adolescence comes to thousands of girls and boys. At the critical age of physical and mental development, when all our care is needed, and both discipline and sympathetic insight are most imperative, they are turned out into the world to fight for themselves. Education, which has rather stimulated than repressed the natural curiosity and adventurous spirit of youth, ends for many just when it is needed most. The boy or girl of thirteen or fourteen—just entering on the heritage of maturity—is given instead a life of dull and sordid toil, without interest, without variety, without scope. Is it surprising that, out of sheer craving for interest and change, many girls "go wrong"? Life has given them so little, and they wanted so much.