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# The Russian Gay-Girls and the War

by Louise Bryant

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In that strange twisted growth called civilization, by which human beings sprout and grow in devious ways, occasionally in the sun but more often as potatoes in a cellar stretching pale faces toward the light, prostitution was created. And so it has come to us down the ages, sometimes a desolate, degraded, regretted institution, sometimes glorified, lifted-up, deified almost. It has crept along inevitably, like the tide, in the wake of the great war. Like a hideous monster it lifts its head beyond the battlefields — and yet no one speaks of it — it is left out of the stories as if it did not exist.

No one can expect to find much approval who tells of it frankly, because if there is one thing we do not like to think squarely about it is prostitution. It haunts us like a bad conscience. So-called “broad-minded” persons have for a long time tucked the whole idea of it away in their brains as a “necessary evil” without realizing what is necessary cannot be evil. As for the rest of the world, it refuses to discuss the matter at all, being an indelicate and forbidden subject. The majority of men will tell you flatly that there are good women and bad women and that’s all there is to it. Think of the audacity of shouting that you know all the tantalizing mystery of evil as well as the deep and aw-

ful sanctity of good! Think of possessing this knowledge, which is as broad as Solomon’s and higher than the stars and at the same time not realizing that there are males and females in the world and therefore there is sex expression somehow to be reckoned with, and if there is not natural, healthy sex expression there will be unnatural, unhealthy sex expression. There will be prostitution. Women will be bought and love paid for.

Ever since I was a very little girl I have known women who sell their emotions. I grew up in a mining town in Nevada, and in that place they had set aside a portion of the town for people to be “bad” in. It was actually called Bad Town, as nonchalantly as one would call part of New York, Yonkers or the Bronx. I used to ride through the crooked streets on horseback.

All the windows had red curtains, and when summer came the women used to sit outside before their doors in the evenings. They wore kimonos with large gaudy flowers. And they were practically the only women in town.

Personalities among them stood out. There was, for example, Virginia Annie. She was a great Amazon and trod the wooden sidewalks like a queen, her broad hips swinging rhythmically, her black picture hat with its trailing plumes pinned rakishly on one side of her head. We used to smile



at each other, but we never spoke. It gave me pleasure to watch her, but I resented the way men nudged each other as she passed. I resented it with a fierce burning hatred without knowing why.

Once I fell ill of some childish disease. The weather was very warm and the windows were open. I will never forget Virginia Annie standing in front of our gate. I could hear and see her from my bed. She had a big doll in her arms and she was crying. They accepted the doll which she had brought as a present for me; but they would not let her come in, though she told them that she once had a little girl and would only stay a minute. Everyone was outraged that she had dared to cross the wretched frontiers of the restricted district and intrude herself into our sacrosanct atmosphere. Even out there in the middle of the desert we had to be respectable and maintain our position.

I wrote her a secret letter, telling her that I loved her and that she was beautiful. The Chinese cook promised to deliver it. But perhaps he never did, for she did not reply, and when I was well again I learned that Virginia Annie had suddenly left town. I was 12 years old.

As a reporter in the West I came to know hundreds of these unhappy girls. For 2 years I spent one afternoon a week in the county jail in the city where I lived. I used to bring them flowers and candy and fashion magazines as if they were "real" ladies, and they used to tell me everything. How infinitely sad were all their stories — poor, sick children! For that is really what the common streetwalker is — an undeveloped, subnormal child, with a confused outlook on life and weighted down with a shame she cannot comprehend. I never met one that *liked* being a prostitute.

Of course I wondered, before I went to Europe, how I would find them in relation to the war. In Paris they were everywhere in countless numbers; desperate little people, clutching out even at men that walked with other women. Especially did their hungry eyes follow the overseas

troops. There was the popular legend of rich Americans, and they saw in every khaki uniform pockets bulging with gold.

France, that had made at least a real attempt to meet this problem in peacetime, failed utterly in wartime. Medical supervision was practically disregarded. Doctors who had formerly had charge of this work were needed at the front and in the hospitals. Venereal disease spread to an alarming degree until it became, as one doctor said, "safer on the streets for a woman than a man."

In the beginning of the war, when the Germans were at the gates of Paris, many of the coquettes begged permission to be nurses or to do other work, but this permission was refused. The whole trouble has been that they were left out of the scheme of things. They were even refused the relief rations given to the rest of the population. And as the war continued prostitution increased. Hundreds of soldiers had mistresses that they no longer supported, and the government made no provision for them, as it did for the legal wives.

Besides all this, it cost much more to live, and many girls were thrown out of employment. While war work absorbed thousands of dependent women, it left a large overflow. If anyone doubts the authenticity of this all he has to do is to walk up the Grand Boulevard about 11:00 in the evening or try to wade through the rows and rows of them in the *variétés*, where they are made to pay a few francs for permission to promenade.

Germany met this problem in an entirely systematic, brutal, and efficient manner. When mobilization was declared the papers carried large notices ordering prostitutes to register. There always had been the strictest registration rules, and the authorities were kept well informed of their actions. Now they were all reexamined, and those that were not healthy were sent to hospitals, so that there should be no spread of disease when the fresh country troops came into the cities. Volunteers were asked to go and live behind the lines. Soldiers were given tickets.... All the prostitutes

in Germany were organized into a huge army, and the oversupply was sent into the munitions factories.

Germany is the only country that has kept a tight rein on prostitution and its accompanying diseases. But this ruthless, systematic efficiency never really settles anything except for the immediate moment. It is Russia, with no system or theories at all, and armed only with love and understanding, that found the true solution.

Since the revolution prostitutes have been allowed to become nurses and to enlist in the women's regiments. Under the proletarian dictatorship, which followed Kerensky's coalition government, the institution is not even recognized. The only place where prostitution still thrives in Russia is in the cafes frequented by rich speculators and foreigners. In the cheap cafes where soldiers and factory workers come and only tea is served the girls coming in from the street are treated like comrades, and it is beautiful to see the mutual respect and affection.

There is no economic reason for being a prostitute now in Russia, and it isn't even a disgrace to

be one, and so the whole pitiful business is just toppling over. *With the most lax marriage laws, prostitution banished, and divorces as easy to get as a cup of tea, there is less immorality in Russia than anywhere in the world!* It seems to me that it wouldn't be a bad idea for some of the professional soul savers with elaborate systems for saving the "fallen" to ponder a little on the simple methods of the much-maligned Bolsheviki.

For over a year our own country has been at war. And what has been done about prostitution? Nothing officially. Individual societies here and there have had "cleaning up" campaigns. And the latest thing is to revive that terrible old American custom of chasing these women from town to town. Philadelphia has driven them out, and other cities expect to take similar action. Does any sane person believe that that will settle anything? Two and two will still be four. And there will, perhaps unfortunately, still be males and females, and there will be economic problems and sex expression. And after the war there will be left a few million more females than males. I wonder if we shall still keep on going round in circles? Wise people!

*Edited by Tim Davenport.*

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