

# Is There a Decline in American Morals?

By GERTRUDE ATHERTON



"There is a curious superstition that when a nation begins to dance its downfall is at hand."

The following article is printed here by courtesy of the Forum, and appears in the March number of that magazine.

IS there a moral decline? How very odd that any one in the United States of America should ask such a question! No country since the world began has had so many moral guardians, self-imposed and legal. I merely touch upon the painful subject of prohibition and drop it. It is, and that is the end of it. (When it isn't—but that is by the way.) Think of the moving-picture censors, who will carefully eliminate from a picture the details of a convict's escape from prison, lest the youth in the audience turn criminal for the fun of breaking out. Think of the towns that are passing laws forbidding high heels, short skirts and transparent blouses. Think of the impending blue laws and the crusade against tobacco. Some years ago, by the way, twelve good women and true of Los Angeles, pillars of the W. C. T. U., called on me and extracted a promise (I was forced to give it or we should all be sitting there yet) that I would not smoke in public any more. Several times there had been front-page "stories" of this sensational breach of morality on my part, and the ignorant youth of the country (according to these good ladies) argued that if I smoked and retained my health and power to turn out a book a year or so, smoking was rather a virtue than a vice. I really gave my promise because I felt sorry for the women—they were so much in earnest, and it was not difficult to guess the large futility of their endeavors.

There is an old, generally ignored statute that any man or woman transgressing the moral code is liable to arrest and imprisonment. There is but one place I know of where this law is sometimes put into effect—Los Angeles, Cal. Some one has wittily said that the reason there is a scandal a day in the Southern California newspapers is because the methodist spirit is constantly at war with the climate. I should say the odds were in favor of the climate

(after observations covering some seven months in Hollywood, the centre of the moving-picture industry), but occasionally the stern, uncompromising spirit of methodism triumphs and a delinquent is arrested. Whether it be true, as rumored, that certain men and women have found the law handy for revenge I am not in a position to say.

Let us consider our famous censor of morals in New York. No one can deny the tenderness of his care in suppressing such a book as "Jurgen." Think of the millions that might have been corrupted by reading that book. It is quite as immoral as "The Electra" of Sophocles or "The Turn of the Screw," by our own Henry James; but some things are bound to escape even the vigilant eye of our censor, and when he does happen upon a chance to prove his solicitude for public morality, then he uses his public office for all it is worth. That "Jurgen" is a masterpiece, one of the few in American literature, makes it all the more dangerous. So does the fact that the innocent mind would have to take a microscope to find the naughtiness (plain only to the highly sophisticated, who are beyond any censor's hope). Subtlety rightfully incurs the suspicion of any pillar of democracy. All cards should be on the table. Subtlety gives to think, and much thinking will find hidden wickedness even where none is intended. Save our youth (who are notoriously addicted to subtly written masterpieces) at all cost. So "Jurgen" now costs \$50 a copy, and its author, Mr. Cabell, has taken to writing for the Yale Review, which, by the way, brazenly advertises its contributor as the author of "Jurgen." Will not the censor please suppress the Yale Review?

Now let us take what is admittedly the best novel (or chronicle) of 1920—"Main Street." (The Domesday Book, of course, is in a class by itself.) It must have sold a hundred thousand copies by this time, and I hope it will sell a million more. It portrays a small town typical of tens of thousands of small towns in the United States; and what is the impression that remains in one's mem-

ory after one has read a dozen or two other novels in bed at night? Is it a mad orgy of dancing, immorality, crime, a repetition of ancient Rome and still more ancient Atlantis? Oh, no! Not by a long sight. It is the history of a people who are sordid, mean and petty, vulgar, common, unambitious, backbiting, ill-educated, suspicious of any attempt, even of amateur attempts, to improve what passes for their minds; smug, conceited and vicious as a lioness bereft of her cubs over any suspected moral lapse. Of course the book is one-sided. There are estimable, mentally ambitious, openly or secretly immoral, traveled and broad-minded people in every small town; human nature in its infinite variety, cropping out everywhere from mountain hamlets to desert islands temporarily inhabited by castaways. But in the main it is true; Mr. Lewis has concerned himself with the majority, and the majority rules when it comes to atmosphere. There is no evidence in this chronicle of Main Streets of America that the dancing craze, popularly supposed to inaugurate the downfall of nations, has taken possession of our middle class, and is not the middle class the backbone of any nation? Nor is any tendency to indulge in terpsichorean revels observable in the ranks of the famous proletariat, even since wood alcohol has taken the place of straight whisky or the sinister juice of the hop. All communities, even the smallest, have their gay little "bunches," but the bunch is lost in the herd, and the herd chews its cud from birth till death, and regards life with the large bovine gaze of formidable respectability.

Take even this new heterogeneous City of Los Angeles, of which Hollywood, my present place of abode, is a distant (and exotic) annex. The newspapers could not be more sensational if printed in blood, and the casual visitor might be pardoned for believing that it spent its days in one wild orgy of murder and marital delinquencies. But it is a city of over half a million inhabitants, and under this red froth no Main Street ever pursued the tenor of its way more

evenly, had a larger proportion of good, quiet, domestic, ultra-respectable people. Like all large cities, it has its show dens of vice, its "gay bunches," its local and floating criminal element, but, ah!—the majority. You only find its parallel in the great French bourgeoisie. They'll reform even the newspapers yet.

Of Hollywood I shall write after I have left it, but Hollywood is itself and no other.

That is a curious superstition—that when a nation begins to dance its downfall is at hand. It is true that Rome danced (possibly Atlantis, although authorities are not as exact as they might be), but then Rome also spent long hours in hot scented baths (do our million Main Streets?): they overate and lived for pleasure generally—the small upper class reclining on the bent backs of their swarming slaves—merely because, having reached the pinnacle of civilization as civilization went in those days, having achieved all that was left in their ken to achieve, they had nothing to do but amuse themselves, and naturally grew so soft and devitalized that they would have been gobbled up in one mouthful by any hardy savage tribe that swept down upon them. Are we in similar case? To use the expressive vernacular of our boys, "Not so's you'd notice it." Even our large cities are only big small towns, as plodding and respectable as the Main Streets in all but those centres of high activity, where people dance for want of other exercise and amusement, and to which flows naturally the frivolous, idle, possibly immoral element with too much money and leisure; an element that has existed in every great city since the beginning of time, and no doubt will continue to exist until its end.

Paris was dancing madly before the war; she had "the craze." Everybody was talking about it. Even the good bourgeoisie, those that dwelt in Paris, at least, were affected. We all know how she collapsed from internal rotteness on Aug. 1, 1914. There was a time when Spain owned nearly three-fourths of the earth's

surface. Was it dancing or brutal stupidity that caused her gradual downfall? Did dancing sink the Armada? Was dancing responsible for the collapse of the old Russian régime, or the same brutal stupidity that distinguished Spain in a century when there was more excuse? The peasants in Germany danced on Sundays, their only day of leisure, and so they had done for centuries; but with the exception of the coarse imitations of Paris vice in Berlin, there was no outbreak of dancing in Germany before the war. They are a heavy-footed race and prefer to eat and grow fat. But they turned the world into chaos.

It is a silly old superstition, and only trotted out when some writer is hard up for publicity and the press for news. If the Main Streets would take to dancing and tune their sluggish blood and brains to action, we should have no "Red menace," no necessity for such disquieting warnings as "Seed of the Sun."

Honor? Is it decaying? Taking a backward glance through history, I should say that the diplomatists of today lie and intrigue pretty much as they have done since the dawn of history—no better, no worse. (Judging from Mr. Wilson's experience at the Paris Conference, it looks as if we were too honorable and honest to survive.) Big Business, Little Business, Yankee horse traders, belong to the same class; in other words, show the same old-crooked streaks inherent in human nature. Lenin cynically announces that he will keep his word only when it suits him; but all fanatics have a screw loose—in other words, are unnormal. The vast majority of people grow up under a certain discipline—first of the home and the school, and then of life—are taught that it is wiser to keep your word than to break it. Crooks, even in high places, "get theirs" sooner or later, even if only in being ostracized to a pale where they have no friends and fewer opportunities.

Take it all in all, it seems to me that if the United States of America is conquered by internal or external enemies it will not be from bad morals but smug stupidity.