

The Sexual Morals of Working-Class Women: A Male View (1890)

Abstract

In the 1880s and 1890s prostitution was a widely debated issue. Members of middle-class moral purity leagues accused the working classes of moral decay. Paul Göhre (1864–1928), Protestant minister and social reformer, spent three months as a factory worker in Chemnitz to experience working-class life and to study class and gender relations. He published his observations in a book entitled *Three Months in a Workshop: A Practical Study* [*Dreieinhalb Monate Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerksbursche. Eine praktische Studie*]. In this excerpt, Göhre offers his perception of his co-workers' sexual morality. He describes fine (and not-so-fine) gradations in their moral behavior—differentiating, for example, between “cheap whores” and “better whores.” Göhre also accuses male workers of treating their wives badly.

Source

Now a word about the dance halls. Almost every Sunday evening I visited one or more—eight or ten, perhaps, in all. Some were quite refined, some very low in character. The worst that I saw was the “Kaiserkrone” in Chemnitz, significantly nicknamed “Bloody Bones” in common parlance. There the pleasures of the dance and the joys of a free fight could be combined. There were collected the very dregs of the social order, prostitutes and factory girls of the degraded type with their gallants, young workmen and soldiers from the Chemnitz garrison. I would lay stress on this last fact, and I take it upon myself to earnestly call the attention of the military authorities to the need of forbidding to the soldiery not merely those places of assembly which are notoriously hot beds of social democracy, but, above all, spots of moral infection like these, where a decently dressed man without a companion can seldom remain unmolested. I was there with one of my mates, somewhat less than an hour, but how many times in our brief stay were we not indecently accosted by women or jostled by them in the grossest manner! There is no alternative in such a place but to accept the situation and be as low as the rest, or to exchange words and, finally, blows. We avoided both horns of this dilemma by prudently withdrawing. The youthful landlord met us as we were leaving, and asked us why we were going; had we not been pleased? We mumbled something in reply, upon which he said, with an air of pride: “Yes, the place had pretty well run down under my father, but now, thank God! I’ve got it on its feet again.”

The “Colosseum” in Kappel presented a great contrast to this. That was the most imposing of all the dance halls that I saw, both as regards its appointments and proportions, its music and its *clientéle*. Here were to be found not only young mechanics earning a high wage, some of them from our own works, but merchants and lawyers, and even, I was assured, officers in civilian dress. Among the fair sex one might meet all sorts of shop girls and saleswomen, with the better class of prostitutes, but there were few servants or factory girls. It was really very much like a ballroom! The ladies—many a lovely daughter of Eve among them!—were in fashionable toilettes, often very expensive, and almost always in good taste; the gentlemen were also well dressed, if not always in correct evening black, and they were, one and all, easy in their manners and motions and full of youthful grace. The workmen were hardly distinguishable from the rest, save by the absence of the pince-nez and by their larger and coarser hands. Nobody wore gloves. It was usual for ladies when they were asked to dance, to silently hold out a handkerchief to their partners, so that the hot hand which clasped their waist might leave no stain of perspiration there.

The other dance halls which I investigated held, I should say, a position midway between these two. Most of them were suburban, half-city, half-country in character, as also in the public they attracted. The

modish clothes of city workmen and workwomen were interspersed among unpretending village costumes; the girls often wore their kerchiefs and gay-colored aprons. The music, too, was more old fashioned, and the entrance fee lower, only twenty-five pfennigs, while the charge at the "Colosseum," if I remember rightly, was fifty pfennigs. Of course, here as elsewhere, every dance called for another charge of ten pfennigs; it was easy to spend three or four marks in a single evening on dancing alone. The tone in these balls was rather freer than in the other; the dancers sang to the music, and their shouts and hurrahs resounded far beyond the room. Often the crowd was so dense and the heat so intolerable that every forehead was streaming with perspiration, and glass after glass was emptied. But then it was that the gaiety was at its height and the evening most successful.

In these respects, but only in these respects, the better dancehalls were the more decently conducted. The jokes and laughter at single tables, among small knots of acquaintances, were all the noisier, the caresses and embraces in sly nooks and corners of the hall and balconies were all the more shameless. In one and the other were the same gay and glowing faces, often beautiful ones, the same brilliantly sparkling eyes, powerful figures, rounded youthful forms. In one and the other were unbridled merriment, increasing tumult, sensual excitement, which reached its climax and its abrupt arrest when, at the stroke of twelve, the music stopped, the hall was emptied, the lights extinguished. Then couple after couple would silently withdraw for a midnight stroll to the fields, where the stars are their only witnesses, or to sweetheart's doorway, or straight to sweetheart's chamber and bed. For, according to my observation, such is, if not the universal, at least the vastly more common ending to the Sunday dance. In these halls, in the nights from Sunday to Monday, our laboring youth is losing today not only its hard-earned wages, but its best strength, its ideals, its chastity. It is no wonder; the wonder would be if it were not so. Think for a moment what it is to spend the week, day after day, in the monotonous routine of the ugly factory, often at uninteresting work, in dirt and sweat, no comfortable resting-place at the noon hour, no resource at evening save the street before the door, the court-yard of the lodging-house or its small and crowded living-room with noise of children and smell of cookery; to spend the nights in wretched sleeping-quarters; to earn no more than enough for all daily needs; to be without oversight, without control, without parental care and love; in a word, without the blessed influence of family ties, with the vigor of youth in every limb, the ardency of youth in heart and head—and then think of the Sunday with its long hours of sleep and complete relaxation, with its freedom which no one curtails, and whose true use there is no one to teach; when the strains of music allure, fresh young faces laugh on every side, lights gleam, spacious and gaily decorated rooms with their arched and lofty ceilings offer a welcome! Here may be found amends for the hateful monotony of the week; here, in one evening, in one night, compensation hundred-fold for the hundred hideous impressions of all the rest. Is it strange then, that unrestrained as they are, these young people plunge into the splendid, maddening whirl, to glut their souls upon its delights, to lose the best of themselves within its vortex? I bring neither accusation nor excuse; I only present the facts in their nakedness and show what needs must be their result.

I believe that in the whole laboring class of Chemnitz it would be hard to find a young man or a young woman, over seventeen, who is chaste. Sexual intercourse, largely the product of these dance halls, has assumed enormous proportions among the youth of today. It is regarded quite simply as natural and customary; there is seldom a trace of consciousness that it can be looked upon as a sin. The seventh commandment does not exist for them, in this respect. True, it is very rarely that they have anything to do with paid prostitutes. That is considered a disgrace, and such women are despised. But almost every young fellow has his sweetheart, and almost every girl her lover, between whom, with very few exceptions, sexual relations are a matter of course. No young man, moreover, feels himself bound to one single girl, nor is it usual to be so. Likewise, the young girl is looked upon with slight disfavor who gives herself too promptly on acquaintance, and with such a girl no lasting connection is formed. When pregnancy occurs, the couple usually marry, whether the connection is long-standing or of but of a week or two; whether they know each other well or not, whether they are congenial or not, whether, in other respects, they are exemplary or worthless. Chance and passion decide marriage for our young people,

seldom either love or inner fitness or well-considered reasons.

This fact, above all others, explains the unhappiness of marriage in the laboring class, the complaints of all, even social democrats, who really seek the people's good, the longing for the elevation and the emancipation of women, and the new social-democratic ideal of marriage. Let me refer to the close of my second chapter. The wife, in many a man's eyes, is in fact only the means of satisfying sexual desire, a drag to his getting on, or, at best, if everything goes well, a capable manager of the household, who holds a tight rein even upon her husband's expenditures. Marriage, according to the expressed opinion of more than one of my fellow-workmen, is "the last and greatest folly a man can commit." There is a better state of things than this in many a family, and between many a married pair there is a gradual growth of mutual respect and affection. Nay, in spite of all that I have said I know several really beautiful marriage relations founded on sincere love, but the fact, broadly speaking, remains, that in the laboring class the wife is far less valued, far less respected, and far worse treated than in any other. She is roughly handled, and very often she is beaten. Her husband requires from her absolute faithfulness to the marriage vow, without feeling himself in the least bound by it. There is in every other respect, as well, a great lack of recognition of the mutual moral obligations which marriage prescribes.

Source of English translation: Paul Göhre, *Three Months in a Workshop. A Practical Study*. New York: Arno Press, 1972, pp. 199–204. An English translation from 1895 is available online at:
<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiuo.ark:/13960/t6d21vq9b&view=1up&seq=1&skin=2021>.

Source of original German text: Paul Göhre, *Drei Monate Fabrikarbeiter und Handwerksbursche. Eine praktische Studie*. Leipzig: Grunow, 1891, pp. 202–7. Available online at:
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