



XIV

THE MINOTAUR

In the autumn of 1885 I was indicted at the Old Bailey — the Central Criminal Court of the United Kingdom — together with the late W. T. Stead, then editor of the 'Pall Mall Gazette,' and certain other persons, on the charge of unlawfully taking Eliza Armstrong, aged thirteen, out of the possession of her parents and against their will. The other persons concerned in the alleged abduction were Rebecca Tarrett, a woman who had formerly kept a house of ill fame, and had reformed her life after coming under the influence of The Salvation Army; Elizabeth Combe, a Swiss Officer of The Army; and Mussabini, a Greek, who had taken the name of Sampson Jacques, and had assisted Stead in the investigations. There was a further charge against Stead, Jarrett, and Jacques, together with one Madame Mourez, a procuress, of being concerned in an assault on the child in question.

The case was tried before Mr. Justice Lopes and a common jury. Mr. Justice Lopes, who afterwards became Lord Ludlow, was said to have exceptional ability in a certain class of case, but not even his closest legal friend would claim a place for him among the great lawyers of his time. Any distinction which the bench lacked, however, was fully made up in the well of the court. The then Attorney-General, Sir Richard Webster, who afterwards became Lord Alverstone and Lord Chief Justice of England, led the prosecution for the crown, and with him were Mr. (now Sir Harry) Poland and Mr. R. S. Wright, then M.P. for Norwich, and afterwards a very able judge of the Queen's Bench. On our side another future Lord Chief, then simply Mr. Charles Russell, appeared for Rebecca Jarrett. He was the outstanding figure in the defence, and showed the conspicuous qualities for which the name of Lord Russell of Killowen will long be remembered in the annals of bench and bar, His junior was Mr. Charles Matthews, afterwards Public Prosecutor. My own counsel was Mr. S. D. Waddy, Q.C., later a judge of the County Court, and with him were Mr. Horne Payne and Mr. R. F. Colam. Mr. Sutherst was for Mrs. Combe, while Jacques's principal counsel was Mr. Henry Matthews, who became Home Secretary in Lord



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Salisbury's Government, and afterwards was raised to the peerage as Viscount Llandaff. Stead defended himself, though his case was 'watched' by Charles Matthews.

The hearing occupied thirteen days in all, and seldom if ever can the Old Bailey have witnessed the unfolding of such a drama. The facts which were elicited created a profound sensation throughout the country, and, indeed, in many parts of the world. In the result I was acquitted; the charge against Elizabeth Combe was dismissed before the case for the defence was even opened; Stead was found guilty of abduction and of aiding and abetting in the assault, and was sentenced to three months' imprisonment; Jacques was acquitted on the first charge, but was found guilty of the same offence as Stead on the second, and was sentenced to one month's imprisonment, and Jarrett was found guilty on both charges and sentenced to six months' imprisonment. In all these cases the punishment was without hard labour, but Madame Mourez, whose case was in a different category, was sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour for six months.

Behind this prosaic narration of names and facts is a somewhat important episode in the social history of modern England. The trial itself was an anti-climax; it was a cross-scent on the trail, and although, as I will explain presently, it had its uses, particularly for The Salvation Army, it must not occupy the field to the exclusion of the real achievement, namely, the violent awakening of the public conscience which had already taken place on the subject of child prostitution, and the expression of that conscience in the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885.

I am concerned mainly in these pages with my own and The Army's share in the events of those agitating days, and I write simply from that point of view.

From our earliest years as the Christian Mission, there came, occasionally, to our penitent-form in Whitechapel, unfortunate girls who looked to us for some means of enabling them to throw off the fetters of their deadly calling. Here and there kind women-comrades would fix up these poor creatures for a night or two, but that was only a very casual and uncertain method of dealing with the problem. Presently one motherly woman, a baker's wife, who had already given up her front room to Magdalen, suggested to me that if only she had more accommodation she could



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take in these girls for a few days and look after them until they were passed on to some employment.

Accordingly, The Army helping her, she and her husband took a larger cottage, which was soon given over entirely to this work, and another cottage was taken in addition. The name of Mrs. Cottrill, in her little home in a shabby East End street, is one to be handed down in honour to our Army posterity, not only for what she herself did, but for the mighty rescue work to which it led. To such humble souls there is reared no monument on earth, save the work of which they helped to lay the foundations, but surely there is a window set up in Heaven!

This work into which The Army, without any set purpose of its own, was gradually led, was placed under the personal supervision of Mrs. Bramwell Booth. Some time after my marriage, the Founder, talking with me of this new development, had said, 'What about Florrie?' (meaning my wife). 'She is very young, I know, but if she feels her heart drawn that way, then let her have charge.' From this time forward my wife began to interest herself in these pitiful cases, and she was duly appointed to lead the new undertaking.

Before she had been at her task for six months, it was brought home to her that a frightful state of things existed in London. She was prepared for the evidence of widespread prostitution, terrible as that is, but it came upon her as an appalling revelation to find that young girls — children, really, of thirteen and fourteen — were being entrapped by a vicious network of carefully devised agencies and in their innocence condemned to a life of shame. She declared further that there existed a regular traffic in these girls; that it had widespread ramifications, both in England and on the Continent; that it was maintained by the most atrocious fraud and villainy, and involved such anguish and degradation as, in her opinion, could not be matched by any trade in human beings known to history.

Those hideous facts greatly affected her, and during the first year or two of our married life, the skies were often overcast on this account. Where there should have been smiles and brightness there were often tears and sorrow. Thinking of the miseries of these poor creatures, Mrs. Booth cried herself to sleep night after night. She told me of the most harrowing incidents which had



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come to her knowledge. I tried to comfort her by suggesting that the stories were probably exaggerated; that the credibility of these folks was not to be trusted too readily, and so on. But, presently yielding to her entreaties, I said that I would look into the matter for myself. I made certain inquiries and interviewed several people. Among the latter was the then Chamberlain of the City of London, Mr. Benjamin Scott, who, in association with Mrs. Josephine Butler, had been attacking the Contagious Diseases Acts then in force. He said that he could well believe all that I heard from my wife, that it was a disgrace to civilization, and that some of the police winked at the betrayers and procurers. He expressed in his gentle, courteous way the hope that something would be done. I answered him with emphasis that something would!

It was some little time after this that, on arriving at our offices in Queen Victoria Street one day, I was informed that the housekeeper when he opened the front gate at seven o'clock that morning had found a young girl outside who had told him an extraordinary story. The girl was brought to me, a decent, well-favoured girl of about seventeen, wearing a very beautiful red silk dress. She told me that she had come up from the country to London in answer to an advertisement for a girl to help in the general work of a house, and had been received on arrival by the mistress who had answered her application. She soon found, however, that she had been entrapped into a brothel.

As the days went on her mistress' urged her with increasing force to be a lady' like the others in the house, gave her the red silk dress, and compelled her to visit a certain music-hall in her company. The girl resisted all importunities, but escape seemed to be impossible, and she did not know what to do or where to go. On the previous night a man had made himself very objectionable, whereupon she fled and barricaded herself in one of the kitchens, yielding neither to threats nor cajolery. After some time she heard the landlady say, 'Leave her there till morning; she will come to her senses when she wants her breakfast.' Left alone, the girl remembered amid her alarm and agitation that in her own town she had attended some meetings of The Salvation Army, and that in her box was an old song-book, which bore on its cover the address of General Booth. He was surely the one person in all the great city who would help her! It was four o'clock in the morning before everything was still in the house. She waited a while, and then crept up to her room, found the little red covered song-book, and slipped out. Inquiring her way of a



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policeman, she walked from Pimlico to Queen Victoria Street, and remained outside the door of Headquarters until it was opened.

The story was hard to believe, but there was the girl, who had been found outside the door between seven and eight o'clock that morning; and there, moreover, was the dress, which obviously was not such as a mistress would provide for a domestic servant.

I sent a man at once to the address from which she said that she had escaped. There they stated at first that they knew nothing of her, but when he told them that they were telling lies, and that he was an Officer of The Salvation Army, which already had the girl under its protection, they changed their tune. At last he got her box away, and we found further confirmation of her story. The incident made a great impression upon me, an impression which was deepened further when a number of girls were brought up from Whitechapel by Mrs. Booth, and I had the opportunity of questioning them. One of them, about fourteen years old, manifestly enceinte, told a terrible story of how she had been met in the street by a very 'nice' woman, taken to a music-hall, persuaded to meet her friend' again, and so dragged into virtual imprisonment and the last outrage.

All this caused me no little suffering and I resolved-and recorded my resolve on paper — that, no matter what the consequences might be, I would do all I could to stop these abominations, to rouse public opinion, to agitate for the improvement of the law, to bring to justice the adulterers and murderers of innocence, and to make a way of escape for the victims.

It will be asked: Where, all this time, were the police? Was there no law which could be invoked to scourge the offenders? The legislative position in 1885 was this: The House of Lords, to its credit, had already three times passed a Bill the primary object of which was to ensure greater protection for young girls and women, and particularly to raise the age at which a girl's consent could free her seducer from responsibility. The age at that time, wickedly and absurdly, was thirteen! On the first two occasions the Bill, after passing the Upper House, met with some untimely fate in the Lower. It was passed for the third time by the Lords in the spring of this fateful year.



The H. Mann will Booth Collection

We knew that the Government was very tepid on the whole question, and without the stimulus of popular agitation it seemed unlikely that the Bill would meet with any greater success on its third venture into the House of Commons than on its first or second. As a matter of fact, to anticipate a little, although Sir William Harcourt, whom we approached, lost no time in putting the Bill on the Orders of the House, it was talked out on the second reading early in May. Altogether an inglorious chapter in the records of the People's Chamber!

The appeal, then, must be to the people themselves, whose heart and conscience, we were sure, had not been interpreted by their representatives in Parliament assembled.

After some further conference with various friends, including Benjamin Scott and Mrs. Josephine Butler, I consulted W. T. Stead, and told him the facts of child enslavement and prostitution as they had come to our notice. I said that I and Mrs. Booth had looked into them sufficiently to feel that, although there might, here and there, be exaggerations, there was urgent need for the passing and the strengthening, if possible, of the measure then before Parliament. I asked him to give 'publicity to the business so that the Government should become aware of the pressure of public opinion. At first Stead hesitated. He had not been so very long in London, and though editor of the 'Pall Mall Gazette,' was not perhaps so firmly in the saddle as afterwards. Finally, however, he came to Headquarters; I introduced him there to Benjamin Scott, who explained the legal situation and also the Continental traffic, a branch of the iniquity with the history and detail of which he was specially familiar. After Scott had gone I told Stead that I had three or four women in the next room, together with a converted brothel-keeper, whom he might interview for himself. These women were brought in one by one, and Stead put them through their stories. Women I call them, but, with the exception of Rebecca Jarrett, they were all under sixteen.

When the interrogatories were ended and the girls had withdrawn, there was a pause, and I looked at Stead. He was evidently deeply moved by what he had heard. It had shaken his vehement nature, and presently his feelings found vent. Raising his fist, he brought it down on my table with a mighty bang, so that the very inkpots shivered, and he uttered one word, the word 'DAMN! This explosion over, I said, 'Yes, that is all very well, but it will not help us. The first



The H. Mann will Booth Collection

thing to do is to get the facts in such a form that we can publish them.' Stead agreed; we not only took counsel together, we prayed together, and then he went away.

A period of consideration, during which Stead conferred with one or two friends, including Mrs. Butler, followed. Ultimately we had another meeting at Headquarters and decided that the best thing to do would be to examine the situation, independently of the evidence of the injured girls whom we had collected. Stead wanted to obtain first-hand information. I provided a woman who actually went and placed herself in a brothel as though she were a woman of doubtful character, and lived there for ten days, reporting what happened. This beautiful and fearless girl carried through the scheme with complete satisfaction. We provided her with money, so that she could pay the brothelkeeper suitably, and at the same time express a certain fastidiousness with regard to callers. Although she had some unpleasant experiences, she came through unharmed. We planned also that Stead should visit her in the house, and there she told him the awful story of what she had witnessed concerning girls of thirteen or thereabouts.

Other people also were set upon the task of investigation, including a detective, a clever fellow, the Greek already mentioned. In the result we found a great deal more immorality in London than we had ever supposed to exist, a great many more houses of ill fame than even the police had known about; but, shocking and sorrowful as all this was, it concerned men and women, and was more or less open and acknowledged. The further thing which we found, and the discovery of which determined our subsequent action, was that running through all this brazen organization of vice, was, as Mrs. Booth had affirmed, a deeper and darker vein of more cruel and appalling wickedness — nothing less than a traffic in children who were lured to a physical and moral doom. It was not the immorality that stung us so much, horrible as it was; it was the deliberate scheming and planning whereby mere children were bought and sold as irrevocably as in a slave market.

The 'Pall Mall Gazette 'Extra' of July 6, 1885, in which Stead described 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,' took the British public by storm in a way that can hardly be paralleled in newspaper history. I remember that I was out of London on the afternoon that the first article, which I had already seen in proof, appeared, and, returning in the evening, I found that the only



copies of the 'Pall Mall Gazette' to be obtained were being sold by boys in Ludgate Circus for half-a-crown a sheet. The sensation was all the more tremendous because the 'Pall Mall Gazette' had a high reputation for exactitude. It was a paper of tone and privilege, much patronized by clubmen. The hot waves of public feeling quickly swelled and lapped up to the doors of the House of Commons.

On the very day of the publication of the first of the articles, Lord Salisbury's new Ministry had met Parliament. Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, in his programme for the remainder of the session, had made no reference to the Criminal Law Amendment Bill, which had been left in the air — and, being House of Commons air, none too healthy a medium in which to be suspended. Nor did the ex-Ministers oppose protest against the omission. But a day or two later, evidently prompted by the state of feeling outside, the Home Secretary, Sir Richard Cross, proposed to resume the interrupted debate, on a promise of co-operation from Sir William Harcourt. Stead and I and one or two propagandists were called in to suggest how the measure could be strengthened. The Bill was a week in Committee in the House of Commons, and it passed into law early in August. The age of consent was put even higher than the fifteen years on which the Lords had insisted. On the motion of the Home Secretary himself, by 179 votes to 71, it was raised to sixteen. Never has there been a more immediate capitulation to the Fourth Estate. But the Fourth Estate in this case had behind it a British public stirred to the depths.

So far so good. We had suffered in the fray and we were still to suffer, but nothing could undo the result of the campaign. The battle was won, — though wounded we were! I say nothing here of myself, but the following by Mrs. Josephine Butler may give some idea of the extent to which Stead had passed through the furnace:

Mr. Stead is publicly known only as a brave and enterprising reformer. But to my mind the memory is ever present of a dark night in which I entered his office, after a day of hand-to-hand wrestling with the powers of Hell. We stumbled up the narrow dark stairs; the lights were out, not a soul was there, it was midnight. I scarcely recognized the haggard face before me as that of Mr. Stead. He threw himself across his desk with a cry like that of a bereaved or outraged mother, rather than that of an indignant man, and sobbed out the words, 'Oh, Mrs. Butler, let



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me weep, let me weep or my heart will break.' He then told me in broken sentences of the little tender girls he had seen that day sold in the fashionable West-end brothels, whom he (father-like) had taken on his knee, and to whom he had spoken of his own little girls. Well might he cry, 'Oh, let me weep!'