

# Rev. Parkhurst Goes Slumming: The Birth of Modern Sexuality

by David Rosen

*Why, I wouldn't stay in that house for all the money in the world.*  
Rev. Charles Parkhurst

## Slumming

On March 5, 1892, three sloppily attired but unmistakable gentlemen visited the Golden Rule Pleasure Club, a unique sex "resort" on West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street, near Greenwich Village's Washington Square Park. Coming through a basement entrance, "Scotch Ann," "a pretty woman, tall, black-haired and of a graceful form," greeted our men-about-town.<sup>1</sup> She introduced them to a world of immoral debauchery that would scandalize the city.\*

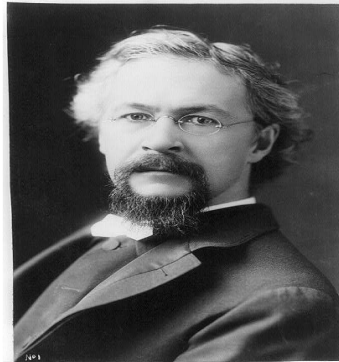
The three visitors were men on a mission, out to discover the true nature of vice and corruption defiling Gotham. The explorers of the modern underworld, of Dante's *fin de siècle* secularized hell, were the Rev. Dr. Charles Parkhurst, the pastor of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church and head of the Society for Prevention of Crime (SPC); John Langdon Erving, one of Parkhurst's zealous, young parishioners, nicknamed "Sunbeam" for his innocence, a Van Rensselaer in his lineage and a clerk at the "high-tech" Mexican Telegraphy Company; and Charles Gardner, a private investigator hired for his special knowledge of the city's underworld. The three undertook their research through the auspices of SPC, a citizens group promoting sexual

morality, temperance and good-government.

In 1894, Gardner published a popular tell-all, *The Doctor and the Devil, Or, The Mid-Night Adventures of Dr. Parkhurst*, about his work uncovering the sins of the city. Among the two-dozen vice dens the three visited, none compared to the Golden Rule. "The basement," Gardner recalled, "was fitted up into little rooms, by means of cheap partitions, which ran to the top of the ceiling from the floor."

He described what greeted the upstanding citizens: "Each room contained a table and a couple of chairs for the use of customers of the vile den." The resort's residents drew his attention. "In each room sat a youth, whose face was painted, eyebrows blackened, and whose airs were those of a young girl," he observed. "Each person talked in a high falsetto voice, and called the others by women's names." The Reverend was appalled.

Parkhurst was mortified to learn that the "female" residents were actually young males wearing dresses, with painted faces, blackened eyebrows and speaking in high-pitched voices to sound like girls. Gardner, a far more traveled man-of-the-world than the Reverend, explained what was playing out before their gaze. As he reported: "The Doctor instantly turned on his heel and fled from the house at top speed. 'Why, I wouldn't stay in that



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\* Photo: Library of Congress

house,' he gasped, 'for all the money in the world.'"<sup>2</sup>

In the 1890s, Parkhurst, along with other upstanding citizens, felt that traditional city life was under attack. He insisted that the threat came from an apparent increase in drinking, gambling and prostitution festering in the city's over-crowded immigrant slums and enjoyed by men of means. More troubling, he argued that the threat was facilitated by the pay-to-play system of corruption that lubricated city life, permeating municipal government and the police.

The Reverend's two-week slumming escapade into the city's underworld became an almost legendary tale, retold by many authors.<sup>3</sup> It was a "tipping point" in the political struggle between Tammany Democrats and insurgent progressives, leading to the establishment of the Lexow Committee, a state commission investigating police corruption, and culminated in the 1894 election of William Strong as mayor.

Parkhurst and his fellow reformers won key battles but lost the great morality war; they succeed politically, but failed socially. They helped shape the nation's formal moral order for decades: in 1910, their call for sexual abstinence helped secure passage of the Mann Act barring interstate sex trafficking; in 1919, their temperance campaign culminated in the adoption of the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment (it was repealed in 1933); and, in 1920, they contributed to the adoption of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment granting women the right to vote. Nevertheless, the U.S. is no longer the country it was during *fin de siècle* era; the Christian right's culture wars, while repressive in terms of a woman's reproductive rights, has lost most its moral authority as abortion remains legal, homosexual marriage is

legal and the adult sex industry is estimated to be a \$50 billion business.

Parkhurst's battle against vice and corruption signaled a shift in the nation's belief system, the transition from "suasion" to "regulation." He, along with most leading 19<sup>th</sup> century moralists, long believed that the power of moral injunction -- of being able to convince someone to be a better, God-fearing person -- could change a person's unacceptable behavior. This belief was giving way to one in which Christian conservatives sought to use the power of the state to enforce moral order, whether involving unacceptable practices or expressions. Parkhurst's campaign was, metaphorically speaking, a finger-in-the-dike effort to forestall the inevitable, the emergence of the modern, 20<sup>th</sup>-century marketplace-mediated sexual practices. This new sexual culture would transform New York and, in time, become the new normal.

#### Virtue tested

The Golden Rule was but one of the two-dozen venues of vice Parkhurst and his associates visited during their late-night explorations into Gotham's underworld. He ventured into up-scale bordellos and down-market boarding-house brothels as well as popular concert saloons and seedy opium dens. The undertaking was, as one commentator later described it, a "journey into the hell of New York's nocturnal depravity."<sup>4</sup> Parkhurst was a man on more than a mission of discovery; it was a mission of redemption, his own.

On Sunday, February 14, 1892, Parkhurst gave a sermon at his Madison Square Church assailing the widespread proliferation of vice throughout the city and the complicity of the city government in the sin

trade. He decried the moral state of the city: "...New York [is] a very hot bed of knavery, debauchery, and bestiality... [where] there is not a young man so noble, nor a young girl so pure, as not to be in a degree infected by the fetid contamination."<sup>5</sup> The sermon led to Parkhurst's gravest professional and personal humiliation.

The Reverend's sermon was a sensation, reprinted and discussed throughout the city. District Attorney De Lancey Nicholl ordered him to appear before a Grand Jury on the 28<sup>th</sup> and, at the hearing, he forced the Reverend to admit that his accusations were based not on first-hand, personal experience but on newspaper accounts. On March 1<sup>st</sup>, the Grand Jury ruled against Parkhurst. He was censured and mocked out of the courtroom; Joseph Pulitzer's *World* denounced him for "bearing false witness." Parkhurst was shamed and vowed revenge.<sup>6</sup>

Many respectable New Yorkers believed they lived in a wicked city. In the 1890s, as one historian argues, "New York reigned as the vice capital of the United States." Estimates vary as to the scale of the vice trade. James McCabe, author of the 1881 study, *New York by Sunlight and Gaslight*, claims that there were 600 houses of prostitution, 900 "assignation houses" (i.e., hourly brothels) and 5,000 professional prostitutes in the city. Another source speculates that by the '90s 8,000 saloons, hundreds of hotels, low-life dives and illegal casinos operated in the city. The *Mail and Express*, a leading anti-Tammany paper, reported that 600 saloons, hundred of brothels, 250 faro banks and 720 policy games did business in Manhattan. Parkhurst estimated that, in '92, hundreds of brothels operated and an estimated 30,000 prostitutes plied their trade in the city.<sup>7</sup>

Whatever the count, vice dens spread throughout Manhattan's "red-light districts."<sup>\*</sup> Many were clustered "uptown" in the Tenderloin district, from Madison Square Park on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street and Fifth Avenue to 48<sup>th</sup> Street between Fifth and Ninth Avenues. Others were located "downtown," on the West side in today's SoHo and Greenwich Village as well as on the East Side along the Bowery to Houston Street and into the Lower East Side. Concert saloons were a leading attraction, offering cheap beer and a good time, welcoming all male comers. Pool halls, gambling dens, tattoo parlors, basement dives and rat pits were common. Brothels, backrooms and private rooms, offered other pleasures. Dance halls welcomed working-class single men and women as well as couples out for a good time. And theatres offered live entertainment, some of it scandalous, as well as the notorious 3<sup>rd</sup> tier reserved for prostitutes. Gotham had become Gomorrah on the Hudson.

The virtuous Rev. Parkhurst was one of those who found the emerging urban culture unacceptable, a threat to traditional moral order. At 50 years, he was a handsome, athletic reformer, an Amherst graduate who had studied in Europe and knew Latin and Greek. In the sermon on February 14<sup>th</sup>, he went further than most moralists who simply railed against the ills of vice. He linked what he believed was the wide-scale presence of immorality to the Tammany political machine and the Democratic Party. He denounced Mayor Hugh Grant, the District Attorney and the police as part of an

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\* The term "red light" is apparently derived from the early days of prostitution in Kansas City when a railroad brakeman posted a red light outside a whorehouse while he was engaged inside. [Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 105.]

"official and administrative criminality that is filthifying our entire municipal life, making New York a very hotbed of knavery, debauchery and bestiality." He urged a campaign to cleanup the city's moral and political corruption. While incensed by immoral vices, he was most deeply offended by municipal corruption, especially by the police.<sup>8</sup>

Parkhurst moved to Gotham from Lenox, MA, in 1880 to become minister of the Madison Square Church. Over the following decade, he became increasingly outspoken condemning vice and corruption. In the winter of '86, he made his first undercover expedition into the city's slums, visiting Castle Garden, Water Street and the Bowery. Writing in 1895, one of the Reverend's earliest biographers, Elias Nason and J. Frank Beale, report that he found "almost the entire vicinity of New York Harbor was a pest-hole of ribaldry, debauchery, obscenity, and shame."<sup>9</sup> In October '90, he gave a sermon railing against Tammany's control over the city government, quoting the 12<sup>th</sup> Psalm, "The wicked walk on every side when the vilest men are exalted."<sup>10</sup> In a speech before the Temperance Congress held on Staten Island the following August, he called for Protestants and Catholics to "earnestly unite to secure legal restrictions on the saloon."<sup>11</sup> Parkhurst joined the PSC in 1890 and, a year later, was asked to assume the group's leadership following the death of its founder, the Presbyterian minister, Howard Crosby.

Many who attended Parkhurst's sermons knew that he was a cat's paw in a bigger political gambit playing out in Gotham. Since the late-1840s, the city had witnessed repeated jousting bouts between two contesting social forces. On one side were the old-line Republicans, the city's gentry, mostly Protestants; they were the party of

Lincoln. On the other side were the insurgents, recently arrived Tammany Democrats, Whitman's "multitude," mostly Irish Catholics but increasingly Jews, Italian Catholics, African-Americans and Chinese. This contestation, in one form or another, shaped the city over the next century.

Among those attending the Reverend's Valentine's Day anti-vice sermon was the aging but ever-clever Thomas Collier Platt, the "boss" of the state Republicans. He knew a good story when he heard it and this one was a great poke in the Tammany eye. Come Monday morning, Parkhurst's sermon was a lead story the city's leading dailies, including the *Herald*, *Sun*, *Times*, *Tribune* and *World*. It rocked the city.

And now Parkhurst was in disgrace. Armed with the determination of a true believer, he knew that to counter the scorn inflicted on him, he needed firsthand evidence of vice and corruption. It was the only way to counter the police and the Tammany machine. To discover such evidence he had to venture into the city's heart of darkness, the other Gotham – and he had to do so in a formal, systematic manner. Parkhurst drew inspiration from earlier underworld vice explorers.

In 1847, the Presbyterian minister, Rev. Samuel Irenaus Prime, ventured into the Five Points and was greeted by "a motley multitude of men and women, yellow and white, black and dingy, old and young, ... ." He found "a set of male and female Bacchanals dancing to the tambourine and fiddle; giggling and laughing in a style peculiar to the remote descendants of Ham, and making 'night hideous' with their lascivious orgies."<sup>12</sup> In 1878, Anthony Comstock, the founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV), went undercover to expose scandalous sex resorts like

Elizabeth Williams' brothel on Greene Street and another venue featuring a "French Act." At Williams' brothel, Comstock paid \$5 to watch three women perform a provocative number, the "Busy Fleas," in which they searched for fleas in their respective underclothes, then undressed and had oral sex which a piano player provided musical accompaniment.<sup>13</sup> Also in the late-'70s, the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher and the Rev. Thomas De Witt Talmage, separately, went slumming as part of their efforts to uncover the city's mysteries; their adventures captured significant press attention. Talmage, writing on vice in his massive lamentation, *The Masque Torn Off* (1879), admitted, "I went as a physician goes into a small-pox hospital, or a fever *lazaretto* [i.e., quarantine station for maritime travellers], to see what practical and useful information I might get." He ventured into "the region where gambling and crime and death hold high carnival. When I speak of houses of dissipation, I do not refer to one sin, or five sins, but to all sins." Digging deeper, he fretted, "As I moved through this place I said, 'This is the home of lost souls. It was a Dante's Inferno; nothing to stir the mirth, but many things to fill the eyes with tears of pity.'"<sup>14</sup>

Being a modern man, Rev. Parkhurst knew that the city's underworld of sin was a foreign territory, a region he really knew little about; it was a world apart. He also knew that others, particularly men (and some women) of the respectable classes, made regular excursions into the underworld. He needed an experienced guide. To meet this need, he was advised to enlist the services of an expert, Charles Gardner, a highly recommended private detective who had worked the previous five years for E. T. Gerry's Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (SPCC).<sup>15</sup>

Like a master theatre director, Gardner gave Parkhurst and young Erving, two very respectable vice tourists, the time of their lives – and charged only \$6 a night, plus expenses. Upon first meeting with the twosome, Gardner was stupefied: "I screamed almost with laughter." Looking at the Reverend, he admitted, "... good gracious, sir, clergyman stands out all over you. It sticks out ten feet. Why, you couldn't get into a Bowery lodging house the way you are dressed." Many "slummers" were rebuffed for being do-gooders from the Salvation Army or another moralist group. Gardner outfitted his underworld explorers with the appropriate costumes. He dressed Parkhurst in black-and-white checked pants, a dirty shirt and a necktie cut from a red-flannel shirt, "a double-breasted reefer jacket" and an old slouch hat. He touched up young Erving with a red tie and a pair of rubber boots. He then artfully messed-up their severely cropped hair so they would be acceptable as just part of the ordinary trade prowling the city's underworld. Gardner positioned Parkhurst as an out-of-town relative, enabling the Reverend to discover evidence proving that Gotham was, indeed, the new Babylon. His total fee for services rendered was \$224; about \$6,080 in 2014 dollars.<sup>16</sup>

#### Wicked city

Parkhurst's underground odyssey culminated at the Golden Rule Pleasure Club, but started at the East River waterfront near the Brooklyn Bridge. The three disguised explorers took the 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue Elevated Railway (the "El") downtown from near Madison Square Park to Franklin Square, descending into one of the city's most notorious neighborhoods, Cherry Hill. It was once a prosperous area where John Hancock and George Washington,

while the nation's first president, had lived. A century later, the Hill was a down-on-its-heels slum with garbage clogging the streets and an increasing number of poor Eastern-European Jewish and Italian Catholic residents. It was part of the notorious 4<sup>th</sup> Ward, an old Irish enclave that had been home to the young William Marcy Tweed, Tammany's legendary "Boss."

The trio's first stop was Tom "Torn" Summers' watering hole at 33 Cherry Street that sold, in Gardner's words, "embalming fluid ... as whiskey." Entering the saloon, the tourists found themselves among a rowdy crowd of pool players and derelicts, everyone drinking and smoking.<sup>17</sup> Wandering through the neighborhood, local streetwalkers drew them into a dive at 342 Water Street for more drinks and solicitations. "On each chair sat something that originally had been a woman," Gardner recounted. "That is, we supposed so, as each gaunt figure wore an ancient 'Mother Hubbard' [outfit]." The Reverend and his compatriots, after chatting with the barkeep and downing some rotgut whiskey, moved on.<sup>18</sup>

Their next stop was Jim Jensen's dance hall at 96 Cherry Street where an old black man played an accordion. A dozen couples drank, smoked and danced. The clientele included sailors, laborers, thieves, gamblers and "the class of wretches that live upon the horrible earnings of the women who frequent the resort ... some of them were almost pretty in the bold, physical prettiness of an abandoned female." Parkhurst bought a drink for a "200 pound" hooker named Baby who invited him home with her, but he graciously declined.<sup>19</sup>

Over the next two weeks the vice explorers visited numerous concert saloons, drinking dives and houses of ill repute throughout the city. They

first explored the downtown "pleasure districts," stopping at the East River Hotel at Water Street and Catharine Slip. It was a venue notorious for the "stalls" where male customers were encouraged to drink "until senses gave way. Then they were at liberty to fall down on the filthy floor and sleep their intoxication off."<sup>20</sup> The troupe visited two cheap sleeping spaces – or "dead houses" -- at 219 and 223 Park Row. At 219, men paid 10-cents to crash the night; at 223, guest who bought a 5-cent whiskey after midnight could sleep on the floor until morning.<sup>21</sup> According to Gardner, the Reverend was a hard man to please and kept demanding more: "Show me something worse." Gardner reflected, "He really went at his slumming work as if his heart was in his tour."<sup>22</sup>

Upping the ante, Gardner took his charges to the city worst slum, the Five Points, today's Chinatown. They visited an opium den in the back room of a restaurant on Doyers Street run by Lee Bing. Parkhurst informed his fellow travelers, "It has been said that there are 30,000 men and women in New York, who are slaves to the opium habit." Rugs and pillows were scattered around the room with many people laying around, motionless, in a stupor. He was particularly struck by the presence of a mixed-race family -- a Chinese man, a "young, black-haired and quite pre-possessing" white woman and their 8-year-old child -- who were "drowned in the fumes of the drug ...." Without moral judgment, Gardner noted, "... the family was enjoying an evening of pleasure, just as you would take your wife and boy to a theatre."

The adventurers toured Little Italy, a growing district of poor Italian Catholic immigrants. "All the buildings are rickety, low, dirty and hideous in their second-hand style of architecture," Gardner observed. "They are filled

from cellar to roof with people. Every inch of a room is used by a tenant. Even the halls are used nightly as sleeping places." The district was marked by such now all-but-forgotten passageways as the Bottle Alley and the Bandit's Roost inside the Mulberry Bend at 59½ Mulberry Street.

The threesome visited a popular "tight house" on Bayard Street, just off the Bowery. It had red shades over the front door transom and "bold-faced, painted women hung out of the windows and chirped merrily as crickets to passers-by made the house belie its looks," Gardner noted.<sup>23</sup> He was surprised to find on the walls "several risqué photographs" depicting the female residents. They wore nothing but "union suits," neck-to-toe tights, showing off their nature-endowed finery. According to Gardner, it was a favorite among U.S. soldiers stationed at nearby Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn. Wandering along Bleecker Street, only a couple blocks from Police Headquarters at 300 Mulberry Street, they were solicited by at least 50 streetwalkers.

The vice explorers also visited a good number of parlor-houses, brothels and bordellos celebrating heterosexual intimacies in the Tenderloin district, just a few blocks from Parkhurst's home. Around 11:30 pm on March 11<sup>th</sup>, the wanderers visited Hattie Adams' establishment, located at 29 and 31 West 27<sup>th</sup> Street. Knocking on the bawdyhouse's door, the trio was ushered in by an African-American female attendant. Adams was "a scraggy, thin, little woman, with hay-colored hair and colorless light eyes" and, after being questioned as to the entertainment offered, she proposed that for \$15 (\$385 in 2015 dollars), five female performers would put on a "dance of nature." An old piano player, wearing a blindfold and dubbed the "Professor," sat in the parlor and

furnished the evening's musical accompaniment.

Upon paying the required fee, the dancers promptly disrobed, leaving on only their garters and stockings. They performed a provocative can-can that included the scandalous "leapfrog." Neither Parkhurst nor his young congregant, "Sunbeam," could be enticed to dance. Gardner took up the challenge. Joining the naked women in the center of the room, he dutifully played his part: "I was the frog and the others jumped over me," he later wrote. "The Doctor sat in the corner with an unmoved face through it all, watching us and slowly sipping at a glass of beer." Hattie questioned Gardner as to the gentleman's identity. "I told her that he was 'from the West,' and was a 'gay boy.'" Hattie toyed with the dignified visitor, trying to pull the Reverend's whiskers, but Parkhurst rebuffed her entreats and she left him alone for the rest of the evening.<sup>24</sup>

Blushing but determined, the adventurers pushed on to one of their final stops, a number of disorderly houses located near the Golden Rule in the Village. The area was popularly known as "Frenchtown" and ran along Wooster and Greene Streets between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Streets. One was at 86 West 3<sup>rd</sup> Street and run by Annie Lewis. Another was at 42 West 4<sup>th</sup> Street and run by Maria Andrea. Approaching Andrea's brothel, the trio was surprised to find a policeman standing on the steps leading into the house. Nonplused, a house girl leaning out of an upper-floor window whistled them in. Gardner, ever observant, noted: "Each girl was dressed in the usual garb of a Mother Hubbard gown, so fashionable in the circles we were in." Frenchtown bordellos were renown for hosting "French circuses," offering a sex act that was then considered the worst

sexual perversion, oral sex. And the mistresses charged dearly for their services, often double for conventional intercourse. Leaving the brothel, Gardner asked the Reverend what he thought of the show. "Think of it!" Parkhurst fumed, "It was the most brutal, most horrible exhibition that I ever saw in my life!" Erving and one of Gardner's detectives visited 25 additional brothels.<sup>25</sup>

#### Moral corruption

On March 13<sup>th</sup>, the Rev. Dr. Parkhurst again stood before his Madison Square congregation offering a sermon attacking vice and corruption. He revealed how, during the previous few weeks, he had wandered the streets of Sodom in disguise to collect first-hand proof of widespread immorality. He proclaimed:

Many a long, dismal, heart-sickening night, in company with two trusted friends, have I spent since I spoke on this matter before, going down into the disgusting depths of this Tammany-debauched town; and it is rotten with a rottenness that is unspeakable and undescribable, and a rottenness that would be absolutely impossible except by the connivance not to say the purchased sympathy, of the men whose one obligation before God, men, their own consciences, is to shield virtue and make vice difficult.

He blamed "slimy, oozy, soil of Tammany Hall" for creating in New York the "dirtiest, crookedest, and ugliest lot of men ever combined in semi-military array outside of Japan and Turkey." He denounced Mayor Grant and his political colleagues as "a lying, perjured, rum-soaked, and libidinous lot" of "polluted harpies."<sup>26</sup>

Parkhurst's revelations again rocked the city. And again, District Attorney Nicholl called him before the Grand Jury. This time he was armed with first-person proof, evidence

substantiated by two unimpeachable witnesses, Erving and Gardner. He railed against not only the saloons, brothels and gambling houses that defiled the city, but the corruption and complicity of the police and city officials, often tied to the Tammany machine, in the illicit trades.

The Reverend's exposé led to not only an increase in middle-class outrage over vice in the city, but a growing acknowledgement that those in power, especially the Tammany-controlled police force, were part of the problem. In a clever move to dissipate mounting anti-Tammany fervor, the District Attorney had the Grand Jury investigate three police captains for bribery and corruption. It found "circumstances and testimony offered have tended to show financial consideration in some cases for lax administration."<sup>27</sup> The police launched a series of cleanup raids, including one by the Mercer Street Precinct that resulted in the arrest of 246 streetwalkers, raids of 20 brothels ("houses of ill fame"), closing 25 saloons (of the 170 in the precinct) and the bracing-up two gambling houses. Both Hattie Adams and Maria Andrea were arrested for operating houses of ill repute; they were tried, convicted, fined and sentenced to terms at the Blackwell's Island workhouse. (Parkhurst and Erving testified at both trials.) The police also closed down other brothels on one of the coldest, snowy nights of the year forcing many women-of-the-night onto bitter-cold streets.<sup>28</sup>

Power is never kind to those who stick a thumb in its eye. Parkhurst's associate, good-time Charlie Gardner, was an unexpected casualty in the police's effort to cleanse the city of corruption. In an act of police retaliation, he was busted for attempted blackmail.<sup>29</sup> He was convicted but the verdict was later set-



aside on appeal.

Parkhurst recognized that the prostitute busts were just another ploy in Tammany's shell game. He knew that Tammany and the police were sacrificing a few hookers so that they could preserve their 20 percent kickback from the illicit vice trade. To up the ante, the Reverend, later in 1892, pulled together 40 religious and civic groups to establish the City Vigilance League (CVL), an organization dedicated to fighting vice. It was a spinoff from the SPC and consisted mostly of "young men of more earnest temper." Members were required to conduct surveys of their neighborhoods and identify gambling parlors, brothels, illegal saloons and abortionists. They sought to determine "the number of customers each location drew."<sup>30</sup>

Parkhurst's campaign fused two moral concerns -- vice and corruption -- into a single, highly-charged political issue, one with significant consequences. His revelations -- and a well-organized political campaign -- led to the creation of a state commission, headed by Senator Clarence, to investigate police corruption. His efforts also contributed to the election of a reform, "Fusion" candidate, William Strong, as mayor in 1894, and to the appointment of Theodore Roosevelt in '95 as president of the police commission. The wars against vice and corruption was on.<sup>31</sup>

#### Another city

While Parkhurst ranted from his pulpit, vice flourished throughout the city, including very near his home and church. He lived at 133 East 35<sup>th</sup> Street; his church was at Madison and 24<sup>th</sup> Street. He was in walking distance from what was popularly known as the Tenderloin, one of the city's most fashionable, most exciting, pleasure districts. A decade earlier,

Rev. Talmage dubbed the area "Satan's Circus" and the name stuck.<sup>32</sup>

The Tenderloin was home to some of the city's finest restaurants -- the Fifth Avenue Hotel, the Hoffman House and Delmonico's -- as well as Madison Square Garden and the Ladies Mile, the fashion district. Satan's Circus was also home to innumerable saloons and sexual resorts. Among the leading dance halls were the Tivoli (West 35<sup>th</sup> Street near Broadway), the Bohemia (West 29<sup>h</sup> Street), Star and Garter (West 30<sup>th</sup> Street and Sixth Ave.) and Sailor's Hall (on 30<sup>th</sup> Street) as well as Heart of Maryland, the Broadway Gardens, Stag Café, Paddy Pig's, Pig's Head, White Elephant and the Chelsea. Buckingham Palace, on West 27<sup>th</sup> Street, was "the handsomest dance house in the city." It was a two-story building, "gaudily decorated," with an orchestra performing and a balcony running along the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor with tables and chairs and where anything went. "The women present are the inmates of the neighboring houses of ill-fame and street walkers," reported McCabe. Another popular venue was the Cairo, located at 36 West 39<sup>th</sup> Street, decorated in an exotic "Turkish" style and where sexual solicitation was common. Another unique attraction was the French Madam's on West 30<sup>th</sup> Street just off Sixth Avenue, famous for its dancing girls who performed a nude can-can dance in a private cubicle for a \$1 a show -- other exotic performances were charged accordingly. It was also home to innumerable sexual resorts, including the White Elephant and the Cremorne. The Cremorne, located in a basement on West 32<sup>nd</sup> Street, was named after a legendary London nightspot and offered very cheap drinks; it was dubbed, "one of the bawdiest resorts in the Tenderloin."<sup>33</sup>

The Haymarket was the Tenderloin's most popular concert saloon. Dubbed

Gotham's Moulin Rouge, it was a three-story dance hall located on Sixth Avenue at 29<sup>th</sup> Street, that sported an inviting sign: "Grand Soiree Dansant!" It catered to the city's underworld of pimps, gamblers, confidence men, opium smokers and other low-life characters. It operated from 1878 to 1913 under different incarnations including the Newmarket, Gramercy Club and the Metropole Club. William McMahon, a retired professional baseball player, first ran it, followed by Edward Corey. Corey insisted that he maintained a respectable establishment, where "everything was aboveboard." His club had a restaurant and presented regular variety shows; he banned female pickpockets, "degenerates" (i.e., feminine male homosexuals) and couples dancing too close, "cheek to cheek." However, upstairs, it offered rooms by the hour or the night.<sup>34</sup>

The Haymarket was described as "animate[d] with the licentious life of the avenue" and attracted sporting men, including the legendary Diamond Jim Brady. It charged men a 25-cent admission fee, but ladies were welcomed free of charge. Many of the damsels were hookers and the saloon was popularly known as "the prostitutes' market." Like other resorts, female attendants encouraged male customers to buy drinks and other favors. Big spenders were invited to accompany the ladies to private, curtained-off rooms in the balcony and upper floors. (For men with other sexual interests, the Artistic Club, serving male homosexual prostitutes and their clients, abutted the Haymarket's back entrance.)<sup>35</sup>

For those seeking more refined sexual encounters, the Tenderloin offered a host of upscale bordellos welcoming gentlemen with a certain yen and money in their pockets. Georgiana Hastings' resort on West 45<sup>th</sup> Street

was the finest. According to one authority, "her customers included prominent millionaires, judges, city officials; she was unique in being exempt from the payment of any tribute to the police. She had political and financial influence." Still other high-class madams included Mrs. Matilda Mermann, a "French" madam, who ran two adjoining houses and installed electric lamps on the front stoop to welcome wayward gentlemen. Mrs. Sadie West ran a local brothel considered by many a public nuisance but was protected by high-up officials. Miss Maud Harvey kept an overnight lodging house at 234 West 51<sup>st</sup> Street, where no questions were asked.<sup>36</sup>

Men of means could indulge still other fantasies. On December 16, 1896, a most scandalous event took place in one of Gotham's finest cabarets, Sherry's, an upscale Tenderloin nightspot. The cabaret hosted a bachelor party for one of the city's leading swells, Clinton Seeley. The gala, organized by the bachelor's brother, Herbert Barnum Seeley, offered as the evening's live entertainment one of the nation's first sex stars, "Little Egypt." At first, rumors circulated that Teddy Roosevelt, head of the police commission, would attend; they were quickly dispelled. However, the scandal marked the nadir of TR's tenure on the police commission. He had bigger fish to fry and was soon off to Washington, DC, to be part of the new William McKinley administration.

On this particular pre-Christmas evening, Seeley, a well-to-do nephew of the legendary P.T. Barnum, hosted an intimate get-together for his brother. The 20 gentlemen who attended were attired in their finest formal wear, their pedigree pre-established. The evening's entertainment highlight was to be a series of erotic presentations by very

attractive female performance artists, featuring Little Egypt. What exactly happened that night is still shrouded in mystery.

In keeping with the customs of the day among some upper-class male partygoers, female performers were subject to not merely the male gaze and catcalls, but lascivious touching and groping as well. As Seeley later explained to the befuddled police, Little Egypt "just wiggled a bit, this way and that, and it was uninteresting, as they had all seen this sort of thing before. There were cries of 'Take it off!' and so forth." When the police arrived, the female performers – naked but for their overcoats – were ushered out a back door.

Little Egypt was an Algerian, born Ashea Waba, who lived in New York as "Mrs. Harper." She performed at the 1893 Chicago Exposition and became one of America's first sex stars, a national sensation. She represented, along with other exotic performers like Fatima (Fahreda Mahzar) and women with stage names like Houri, Husaria, Farida and Maryeta, the erotic fantasy of all that was foreign, seductive, un-American. Little Egypt was so popular she helped launch the new movie industry. She was featured in one of Thomas Edison's earliest peep shows and was, as a leading scholar noted, W. K. L. Dickson's "first Mutoscope hit." Not to underestimate her appeal, she was professionally represented by no less a legendary theatrical figure than Oscar Hammerstein 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to Little Egypt, Edison produced peep shows featuring other alluring, foreign damsels, including one named Fatima. Another was Carmencita, the "lovely spanish dancer" who performed "the butterfly dance." According to the *Newark Evening News* of July 17, 1894, she

was featured in an Edison "peep" displayed at Asbury Park, NJ.<sup>38</sup> Two years later, William Heise's classic vitascope moving picture, *The Kiss*, was premiered at the Koster & Bial's Music Hall at Broadway and 34<sup>th</sup> Street. The early movie runs 16 to 51 seconds (depending on version) and depicts a close-up of John Rice and May Irwin passionately kissing. This early porn performance likely shocked, if not excited, many New Yorkers. It was a larger-than-life erotic intimacy that must have been thrilling, even overwhelming.

Projected moving film emerged in the late-19<sup>th</sup> century and the first storefront movie theatres opened at the turn of the new century. One of the earliest picture shows at a Chicago penny arcade was *How Girls Undress*; it was displayed on a "mutascope" system and attracted many young boys.<sup>39</sup> Movie theatres were a new social venue, home to a revolutionary technology, the moving-image system of production and display. Moving pictures were a new form of artistic expression, of visualizing a storyline, acting, cinematography and directing. Theatres were darkened spaces in which individuals experienced public anonymity and witnessed popular spectacles, suggestive enactments on a large-then-life display screen. In the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, movie theatres were one of the few acceptable social spaces in which white men and women, often un-chaperoned strangers, could share an intimate proximity and an exciting visual experience; African-Americans were barred from early New York movie houses.

Other than the saloon, the dance hall or the Church-sanctioned gathering, young men and women (excluding prostitutes) had few public venues in which to socialize let alone flirt, touch or kiss. "The very darkness of the

room," warned the social reformer Jane Addams in 1909, "is an added attraction to many young people, for whom the space is filled with the glamour of love making."<sup>40</sup> The large-scale display of sexual intimacy illustrated by *The Kiss* must have been shocking, a cascade of images reinforcing the complexity, confusion and rawness of modern urban life. A newspaper critic of the day exclaimed: "Magnified to gargantuan proportions, it is absolutely disgusting. ... Such things call for police intervention."<sup>41</sup>

For those interested in sexually provocative images and stories, New York offered a multitude of choice in addition to Nickelodeons and early movie storefronts. Sculptures along with paintings, drawings and lithographs as well as postcards and playing cards could be titillating. Books -- including literature, poetry, medical studies and marital aids -- offered erotic and obscene representations. Newer technologies, including the black-and-white photograph and stereoscopic daguerreotype, added to erotic excitement<sup>42</sup>

### Sexual culture

When Parkhurst went slumming in Gotham's vice districts, he joined a long line of other socially respectable men (and some women) who ventured into the city's underworld. While the Reverend went to document the sins of the city, many others went to enjoy the pleasures it offered, the pleasures respectable society denied them. For them, as well as for Parkhurst, a new world awaited.

One of those upstanding citizens who visited Gotham's 1890s underworld was Charles Nesbitt, a visiting medical student from North Carolina. Along with a friend, he toured Bowery saloons where "male perverts, dressed

in elaborate female evening costumes, 'sat for company' and received a commission on all the drinks served by the house to them and their customers."<sup>43</sup> These were not the only transvestites he met.

The inquisitive student stopped by the Slide, one of the city's most notorious "fairy" clubs. Located at 157 Bleeker Street, not far from the Golden Rule, it was run by Frank Stevenson. Stevenson is a legendary 19<sup>th</sup> century underworld figure who would later run the Black & Tan, a seedy basement bar on Bleeker Street near the Bowery that welcome whites and blacks, a rare social venue. The great Gotham gossip, Herbert Asbury, author of the legendary *Gangs of New York*, says that Stevenson resembled "a corpse; his face was almost as white as snow and his cheeks were sunken, while his eyebrows and hair were black as ink." Four bartenders manned the Black & Tan's long counter. The club was popular among African-Americans as well as white women rumored to be prostitutes and catering to men of color, including Native Americans and Chinese.<sup>44</sup>

The Slide was a very different scene. In 1892, the *New York Herald* reported: "It is a fact that the Slide and the unspeakable nature of the orgies practiced there are a matter of common talk among men who are bent on taking in the town, making a night of it." It was a club offering out-of-towners "something *outré* in the way of the fast life ... " Still another visitor, a lawyer, left an evocative reminiscence: "Here men of degenerate type were the waiters, some of them going to the extent of rouging their necks. In falsetto voices they sang filthy ditties, and while not otherwise busy drop into a chair at the table of any visitor who would brook their awful presence."<sup>45</sup>

At the Slide, young Nesbitt made the acquaintance of one of the club's popular trannies, "Princess Toto." The two became fast friends and the Princess, sensing the student's open-mindedness, inviting him to a drag ball at the Walhalla Hall, a Lower East Side party space. Walking in, Nesbitt was overwhelmed. Some 500 same-sex male and female couples were in attendance. Some were dancing to a waltz, including "quite a few ... masculine women in male evening dress dancing with other women."<sup>46</sup>

The Golden Rule, the Slide and Walhalla Hall were but three of the many gay and transvestite saloons, clubs and bawdyhouses operating in the city in the 1890s. One of the most notorious male brothels was Paresis Hall located at 392 Bowery at 5<sup>th</sup> Street. A witness testifying before the Mazet Committee, a New York State 1899 investigation into city corruption, the Paresis Hall was "a well-known resort for male prostitutes ... ." Digging deeper, it reported: "These men that conduct themselves there -- well, they act effeminately; most of them are painted and powdered; they are called Princess this and Lady So and So and the Duchess of Marlboro, and get up and sing as women, and dance." Most disturbing, Gardner found that fairies "ape the female character; call each other sisters and take people out for immoral purposes." Other male brothels included the Manila Hall, the Black Rabbit and the Palm.<sup>47</sup>

During the 1890s, Gotham's sexual culture was being recast by what was known as the "new woman." While the earliest notion of the new woman emerged in the pre-Civil War era (e.g., Francis Wright), it was not until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that she became a social reality. As the U.S. industrialized and urbanized, women joined the labor market and earned an

income; they received an education (many getting a high-school degree, some to college and even post-graduate study); and they fought for and -- three decades later -- won the vote. They also sought new forms of sexual experiences, including more expressive forms of dress, the right to birth control and to enjoy a wider palette of sexual pleasures.

A series of very contradictory social forces defined the new woman. The Second Great Awakening of the pre-Civil War era inspired the movement in two, sometimes incompatible, expressions. One stressed individual salvation, the redemption of a person's soul; the other advocated public good, establishing "the Kingdom of God" on earth. Both strands of this renewed Christianity found strong appeal among women. During the pre-Civil War era, leading women of the "social Christian" movement included Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, anti-slavery activists. They organized the 1848 Seneca Falls, NY, women's rights convention that promoted suffrage, equal opportunities in education and jobs, and legal rights for women. In the postwar era, Frances Willard, a strong suffragist, ran the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU); established 1874, it played a leadership role in the passage of the Mann Act (1910) and the adoption of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Amendment (1919, 1920).

In 1890, Vida Scudder helped establish the "settlement house" movement to address the growing problem of urban poverty. Many upstanding women -- often referred to as "club women" -- were active in what were known as "prevention" societies.<sup>48</sup> These groups first emerged in England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and got started in the U.S. in 1866 with the founding of the American Society for the Prevention of

Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). By the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, a host of these groups operated in Gotham. Elbridge Gerry established the SPCC in 1866, where Gardner had worked; Comstock, with the backing of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), founded the NYSSV (or SSV) in 1873; Rev. Crosby founded the SPC in 1877 (which Parkhurst took over in 1890) to fight "white slavery," prostitution; and in 1884, the Rev. Benjamin DeCosta established the White Cross Society promoting purity (i.e., sexual abstinence) until marriage. In 1892, Parkhurst established the CVL to actively fight vice; it worked with the Chamber of Commerce's Committee of Fifteen. According to historian Jesse Todd, "the CVL combined the shaming techniques of the old moral reform societies and the more heavy-handed tactics of the coercive agencies."<sup>49</sup>

These groups engaged in a two-front war against vice. First, they sought to suppress illicit activities taking place in working-class and immigrant slums including the Bowery, the Lower East Side and Greenwich Village. Second, they sought to stop the spread of unacceptable sexual activities among the more respectable classes, especially well-to-do "sporting men" who were regulars at Tenderloin venues. Prevention groups differed from other morality groups (like the YMCA and WCTU) in that they combined politics and the legal system with direct action to achieve their goals.

In post-Civil War New York, the state legislation empowered prevention societies with law enforcement authority. The state initially gave the SPCC the power to issue warrants. However, in the ongoing war between Republicans and Tammany Democrats, legislators passively enabled prevention groups to undertake

vigilante-like raids on private amusement resorts and execute arrests. These societies, in effect, privatized law enforcement.

Prevention societies, often with the active participation of female members, were troubled by the emergence of the more sexualized new woman. She challenged the long-held Victorian model of femininity, the "Cult of Domesticity," based on motherhood, propriety and passionlessness.<sup>50</sup> The new woman flaunted a different sense of self-hood, one rooted in being single, a wage earner and embracing sensual fulfillment. She most explicitly displayed this new self-hood in how she looked, had fun and, ultimately, voted.

The "appearance industry" was the principal agent for the constitution of the new woman. It took shape in the *fin de siècle* era and was driven by the combined power of the cosmetics companies, beauty parlors, garment and shoe manufacturers, department stores, small retailers, mail-order houses, advertising agencies and, last but not least, the popular media of women's magazines. One of the principal battlegrounds over female sexuality involved the face. For generations, a highly made-up face was a social scandal. Outside the theatre, it signaled a prostitute, a "painted lady." In the 1880s, makeup began "to cross from the stage into everyday life." By the turn-of-the-20<sup>th</sup> century, cosmetics, particularly lipstick, came to stand for women's new freedom in an age where "appearances were fluid and social rank unstable." Makeup, as Kathy Peiss points out, "assert[ed] worldliness against insularity and sexual desire against chastity." The traditionalist's battle against the "false face" eroded as women, especially younger ones, used makeup to "transform the spectacle of themselves

into self-conscious performances." By WW-I, the line between a painted lady and a respectable working girl was gone.<sup>51</sup>

In the 1890s, New York's new woman liked to have fun. A growing assortment of popular entertainment welcomed them, often single and un-chaperoned. Public venues included wholesome traveling shows, most notably Chautauqua circuits, offering lectures on a variety of issues of the day and scholarly subjects as well as classic and Broadway plays, musical presentations and even movies. Less wholesome venues of entertainment proliferated, ranging from circuses to wild-west shows to Nickelodeons and movie theatres to Coney Island, Brooklyn's popular amusement district with its affordable Luna Park and Steeplechase Park. Dance halls, however, were the most threatening and Parkhurst passed a number of them wandering along the Bowery. They were festive spaces, welcoming single, young and un-chaperoned women to flirt, even touch and rub against, men. Among the popular women's repertoire were "pivoting" and "tough dances." As Peiss observed, "Pivoting was a wild, spinning dance that promoted a charged atmosphere of physical excitement; tough dances ranged from a slow shimmy, or shaking of the hips and shoulders, to boisterous animal imitations."<sup>52</sup>

Parkhurst and his companions ventured into the bowels of city's underworld and found a very different "new" woman. At the East River Hotel, Gardner was shocked by her physical appearance "Dirty; I never saw such dirt," he lamented. "It was caked and crusted on hands and faces. Hair tangled and matted around bloated, rum-flushed faces. Clothing scant, soiled, ragged and ill-smelling, half covering gaunt bodies." But this

was only the outward appearance of a deeper malady. Their eyes gleamed "with the madness of delirium tremens, or faded from potent drugs, masqueraded in alcohol as liquor. Women lost to everything in the world, except a mere love for liquor." Parkhurst found, "her eyes expressed volumes."<sup>53</sup>

The trio was propositioned by numerous "actresses" -- "painted, brazen women of the town" -- at the Windsor Concert Garden on the Bowery. Gardner recalled one: "Her hair and eyes were brown, but her complexion had been bought at a drug store, and had been applied to her face in liquid form by a fire engine, I should judge." After an on-stage performance, the female entertainers joined the male guests, sitting on their laps and encouraged them to spend money on drink. A heavily made-up "actress" in a low-cut dress greeted the trio and ordered brandy all-around. (The female attendants received a 20 percent kickback on drink orders.)<sup>54</sup>

At the Five Points opium den, Parkhurst struck-up a conversation with a 20-year-old white woman who was "tall, and well-formed" and "was well-dressed in a blue tea gown." "I am a Western girl," she admitted, "and was betrayed by the man I was engaged to about five years ago." She first settled in Tenderloin, "but I couldn't stand it. It was too tough for me, so I got to smoking opium. Then I got to be a chronic pipe-hitter." She then moved to the Five Points where she now lived with a Chinese man. "I live twice as well as I did when I was in the Tenderloin district," she admitted. "I tell you, I'd rather be living with a 'Chink,' as the Sixth Warders call Chinamen, than be a woman of the town in New York City, any day." However, the Reverend was stupefied by the power the drug exerted. According to Gardner, "But

what struck Dr. Parkhurst most was the absolute silence, a silence that wraps itself around you until you want to shout, scream, yell, do anything to make a noise."<sup>55</sup>

#### Moral order

In 1892, New York was a different, far smaller city than it is today. Then it included only Manhattan and chunks of the Bronx and Westchester. That year Parkhurst and his trusty companions wandered surreptitiously through Manhattan searching for the vice underworld, the sins of the city. And they found it in the working-class slums that flourished throughout the city. Today's five-borough city was consolidated in 1898, a brilliant move by Republicans to undermine the power of the Manhattan-anchored Tammany Democratic political machine. And it partially worked, Tammany's power was diluted.<sup>56</sup>

Historian Timothy Gilfoyle argues, "the period of Progressive reform in New York City began with Parkhurst's assault on sexual turpitude."<sup>57</sup> The Reverend's fears expressed the growing perception among respectable citizens that New York's -- and America's -- moral order was under attack. The threat came from the growing appeal of drinking, gambling and, most especially, sex among poor people, immigrants and some swells. This sexual expression took many forms, including pornography, prostitution and homosexuality as well as the private sex practices people engaged in, most especially oral or "French" sex. Changes in the forms of sexual expression embodied broader economic and cultural processes recasting the city, most vividly reflected in the make-up of its people, commerce and entertainment.

Cities throughout the country were battlegrounds over vice, particularly

sexual expression. As could be expected, cities adopted different strategies to deal with the changing urban sexual culture. Some attempted to regulate -- legally or informally -- commercial vice as well as drinking clubs, gambling joints and opium dens known as "red light" districts. In New York, informal zones of illicit vice were tolerated in the Five Points, the Bowery, Greenwich Village and the Tenderloin. Similar districts operated throughout the country: in Brooklyn, it was Brownsville; in Baltimore, the Block; in Chicago, the Levee; in Denver at Market Street; and San Francisco's Barbary Coast. However, between 1898 and 1917, New Orleans's Storyville was the nation's most renown -- and regulated! -- zones of legal prostitution, drinking and gambling. Historian Ruth Rosen notes, "[in] these sporting resorts with their streets lined with brothels, saloons, and hotels, the air [was] filled with the odor of tobacco and the sounds of blaring music, [and the windows bore] images of women making obscene gestures ... ." The 19<sup>th</sup> century harlot who called a red-light district home prefigured the 20th century's new woman.<sup>58</sup>

After nearly two decades of struggle for sexual reform, Parkhurst and his fellow advocates succeeded with Congress's passage of the 1910 Mann Act barring interstate sex trafficking. However, the major case prosecuted under the Mann Act was against Jack Johnson, the first African-American world heavyweight-boxing champion. In one of its most infamous cases, the FBI's harassed, arrested, prosecuted, convicted and ultimately imprisoned Johnson, illustrating how federal laws can be subverted for political ends.<sup>59</sup>

During the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gotham's multitude nearly tripled, jumping to over 1.5 million in 1890 from 516,000 in 1850. During this



period, two waves of immigration transformed the city's face sexual culture. The first wave came before the Civil War, especially in the '40s and '50s, and consisted predominately of Germans (including Jews) and Irish driven from their homeland by a terrible potato famine. By 1890, first and second generation Irish-Americans represented over half of city's population and one-third of registered voters. They formed the backbone of the new Democratic Party, the Tammany machine. A *new* New York was being cast.<sup>60</sup>

In the 1880s, a second wave of immigrants began to flood the city. It consisted of three distinct elements: (i) people from Southern and Eastern Europe, notably Italians, Poles, Bohemians and Russian Jews; (ii) peoples from the Caribbean, including Puerto Rico; and (iii) a growing number of African-Americans from the South fleeing repressive Jim Crow conditions. This second wave of immigration continued until the post-WW-I period and, collectively, reshaped the city's character.

These immigrants lived three lives. One involved their fellow immigrants, family and friends from the old country; they provided continuity. A second life involved other immigrants, minorities and poor people who called the city's slums home; they provided community. And a third life involved an immigrant's interchange with the larger city, the New York they called place; it suggested the bigger world that awaited them and, most importantly, their children.

Many second-wave immigrants came with little to nothing in their pockets and were forced to live in the most crowded slums, often taking the most menial jobs. They worked as manual laborers, garment workers, restaurant waiters, household-service helper and

sex workers. The city's poor and working classes clustered in ghettos throughout the city, whether the Five Points, the Bowery, Lower East Side, Greenwich Village, Hell's Kitchen or Harlem. These slums deeply disturbed Rev. Parkhurst, especially the sexual practices that he believed took place there. He knew that the poor, the immigrant, the colored, the non-Protestant and the non-Christian populated these neighborhoods. Equally challenging, up-market slummers regularly visited the low-life to engage in illicit practices. These slums were fashioning new, socially shared values that would ultimately change the city's sexual culture. Poor New Yorkers' experiences of place – of poverty, tradition and aesthetics – helped shape Gotham's emerging, 20<sup>th</sup> century sexual culture.

In 1892, Gotham was bustling; immigrants thronged the major walkways and subways, they even strolled in Central Park. These *new* New Yorkers fostered changes that challenged the established mores shared by Parkhurst and others of the respectable classes. This class included the establishment press represented by the *Herald*, *Sun*, *Times* and *Tribune*, the dominant media of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century. The gentry perceived that their acceptable moral order was under attack. Slums were seen as vice districts, home to drinking, dancing, smoking, gambling, prostitution and homosexuals. Most troubling, the slums' raucous men and painted ladies were dirty – they smelled, didn't regularly bathe, flaunted sex and ate smelly, mysterious foods. Many upper-crust New Yorkers accepted Sylvester Graham's linkage of food to sexual behavior. Graham, a pre-Civil War moral reformer, believed that rich foods, alcohol, coffees and teas, meats and condiments stimulated masturbation.<sup>61</sup> A half-century later,

Rev. Pankhurst's campaign sought to sterilize the city against the growing array of vices -- especially alcohol and sex -- that flourished in the teeming ethnic slums.

#### Mounting crisis

Pankhurst's morality campaign was played out against a background of a mounting social crisis. In 1892, a series of bitter labor disputes swept the nation: steel workers walked out in Homestead, PA; a general strike shut down New Orleans, LA; coal miners struck in Tennessee; railroad switchmen struck in Buffalo, NY; and Idaho copper miners refused to enter the pits. For New Yorkers, the political tension culminated in July '92 when a local anarchist, Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman's closest comrade and lover, ventured to Pittsburgh to address through direct action the grievances of the striking miners. He shot, but failed to kill, the steel industrialist Henry Frick.<sup>62</sup>

In '92, New York was the center of country's finance and began to stutter as the nation's economy started to unravel, foreshadowing the Panic of 1893. It started on May 5<sup>th</sup> with the crash of the New York Stock Exchange and quickly spread to the rest of the nation. On June 27<sup>th</sup>, the Exchange crashed again. The Panic of '93 saw the failure of 158 national banks (mostly in the South and West), 172 state banks, 177 private banks, 47 savings banks, 13 loan and trust companies, 16 mortgage companies and innumerable Wall Street brokerage houses. Over 15,000 businesses went into receivership. By the winter of '93, unemployment hit 18 percent! Those still working swallowed pay cuts of about 10 percent. The Panic of '93 dragged on until June 1894.<sup>63</sup>

In Gotham, the Panic of '93 set the stage for the mayoral victory of the "Fusion" candidate, William Strong. Backed by Parkhurst and drawing together old-line Republicans and disaffected Democrats, Fusion branded itself "progressive" and defeated the Tammany machine in the '94 election. While not much of a religious man, Mayor Strong had a debt to pay to clean government and moral reformers who had backed him. He appointed Theodore Roosevelt president of the police commission.

"TR" had run for mayor in 1886 and suffered a drubbing. To recover, he went to Washington, D.C., and served as a Civil Service commissioner in the Benjamin Harrison administration. In '94, he had a private dinner with Parkhurst -- and the two hit it off. TR later confided to a friend that he feared the Reverend would promote a campaign to end "certain evils which I fear cannot possibly be suppressed in a city like New York in our present state of existence." TR had low expectations of Parkhurst, but found him a "good fellow." They spent the evening discussing police corruption and never broached the subject of prostitution. As Roosevelt's biographer, Richard Zacks, notes, it "might have been too delicate a topic for either man."<sup>64</sup> In '95, TR took on corruption and vice but with mixed results. During the first six months of his tenure, he battled police force corruption. It was a thankless fight but he achieved some major victories in the force's "professionalization." During the next year of his tenure, TR served as the city's archbishop of secular morality -- and, in this role, he failed.

Under Roosevelt's leadership, the police commission sought to enforce an 1857 state ordinance closing establishments that permitted alcohol drinking on the Sabbath. Over the

four decades since the ordinance was enacted, it was rarely enforced. Like many laws, "blue laws" were a little-disguised attempt to impose the moral order of the upper crust on the newly arrived, ethnic and poor multitude. The police force was the means to impose this moral rectitude. In the wake of the reformist 1894 electoral victory, a new, Republican-controlled police commission was appointed to enforce the city's moral standards. Where politicians, priests and pundits failed to instill virtue, the police force was called upon to enforce secular values.<sup>65</sup>

As the city recovered from the Panic of '93, a new vice culture flourished. While giving lip service to suppression of gambling, prostitution and pornography, TR's principle initiative – dubbed "Roosevelt Sundays" -- was targeted at stopping working-class men from drinking in saloons on the Christian Sabbath. Under his leadership, the abstinence law was bitterly enforced for a year or so, transforming the city into a morality war-zone. Ultimately, the campaign failed, undercut by savage state politics. The passage of Raines Law in 1896 permitted "hotels" with 10 beds to sell alcohol, eviscerating Roosevelt's authority.<sup>66</sup>

Under the Raines Law, ever-resourceful saloonkeepers — often working hand in glove with large brewery owners and local police officials — quickly transformed back rooms, walk-ups, cellars and other spaces to house 10 beds. This effectively sidestepped the intent of the law and opened up a new revenue source, commercial sex. As Edwin Seligman notes in his appendix to the original *Committee of Fifteen's* 1902 report on New York vice, "the effect of the Raines Law has been to provide unexampled accommodations for prostitution." Raines Law hotels

quickly became "the leading institution of prostitution in Gotham."<sup>67</sup> With New York State's adoption of the 1906 Prentice Law, the number of Raines hotels was cut in half.<sup>68</sup>

Rev. Parkhurst was a moralist, an upright, well-intentioned Christian minister who embraced some of the "progressive" sensibility of his age. He railed against municipal corruption, a betrayal of the Founding Fathers, but sought to contain the excesses of the capitalist marketplace, particularly involving drinking, smoking, gambling, drugs and commercial sex. He supported the temperance movement and broadly supported women's rights, including suffrage. Like many leading conservative and religious leaders of the day, he backed a woman's right to vote because they believed that these newly-empowered citizens would join them in their attempt to use the power of the state to impose abstinence, prohibit commercial sex, end homosexuality and suppress obscene forms of expression.

Like many reformers of the Progressive era, Parkhurst was baffled by the slum dwellers he encountered, particularly the women who called the city's ghettos home. Gardner's tell-all, along with other accounts, reveals a minister adrift during a period profound social change. He sought the moral uplift of the slum dwellers he studied, but he didn't seem to understand their plight, their poverty, their excesses. With a number of notable exceptions, he didn't seem to really care about them as people. They were pawns in a bigger political game he was playing with the Tammany machine.

Looking back, Parkhurst's expedition into Gotham's underworld – and what he voyeuristically discovered – seems almost prurient, an exposé for a traditional-values cable TV reality show. Since the nation's founding four

centuries ago, American moralists have had an especially difficult time with sexuality. People who have expressed illicit desires or engaged in un-accepted practices have been shamed, imprisoned, tortured, sterilized, electro-shocked, hung and worse. The rage shown by Parkhurst, Comstock and other late-19<sup>th</sup> century moralists succeeded in slowing down the inevitable, the integration of sexuality into the marketplace. Truly *progressive* social reformers of the early-20<sup>th</sup> century like Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger understood the tyranny of the marketplace and fought to set limits, safeguards, against turning all human relations into commodities. Over the last century-plus, however, the marketplace has fundamentally and irreversibly transformed sexuality.

Today, the concepts of "sin" or "vice" are suggestive of personal, prurient fantasy but no longer invoke the same moral bite they once did. For many Americans today, the concept of immorality is no longer relevant. More modern, scientific notions like "deviance," "perversion" and "pathology" have superseded the old Biblical nomenclature. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century jargon of authenticity, perversion has become "deviance without pathology."<sup>69</sup>

In Parkhurst's time, women wore ankle-length dresses with corsets, masturbation was decried, intercourse was for procreation not pleasure, birth control prohibited, abortion a crime, interracial sex a hanging offense, pre-marital sex forbidden, pornography an

obscenity and homosexuality a sin. The boundaries of acceptable sexual practice, of what is "normal," have been transformed. Masturbation is no longer a sin and oral sex is common. Pre- and non-marital sex among "consenting" age-appropriate people is an accepted convention. Commercial sex remains legal in only a handful of counties in Nevada, but is a multi-billion dollar business. Sex toys ("wellness") and porn are also multi-billion dollar industries. The Supreme Court has made gay marriage legal and the U.S. military is accepting transgender soldiers. Drinking is a huge regulated industry and marijuana is becoming increasingly accepted for medical and recreational purposes. And gambling is an all-American enterprise, with innumerable states running lotteries and regulating casinos.

Sex has shifted from a moral issue, "sin," to a legal concern, "consent," whether public or private. Today, anything goes as long as it's between age-appropriate, consenting people, whether gay, straight, male or female. The once-deviant sex practices that so shocked Parkhurst have become the new normal. Today's acceptable sexual experience expresses a wider sensuous pallet than anytime in American history. The only true sex crime is the violation of consent, the equality of all participants, whether involving rape, pedophilia, child porn, sex trafficking or lust murder. Rev. Parkhurst's investigation into the city's underworld has become today's must-watched reality TV series. Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Charles W. Gardner, *The Doctor and the Devil, Or, The Mid-Night Adventures of Dr. Parkhurst* (Gardner & Co., 1894), p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup> Lloyd Morris, *Incredible New York: High Life and Low Life of the Last Hundred Years* (New York: Random House, 1951); Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (New York: Vantage, 1992); Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York: Norton, 1992) and *A Pickpocket's Tale: The Underworld of 19<sup>th</sup> Century New York* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006); Warren Sloat, *A Battle for The Soul of New York: Tammany Hall, Police Corruption, Vice, and Reverend Charles Parkhurst's Crusade against Them, 1892-1895*: (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002): and Richard Zacks, *Island of Vice: Theodore Roosevelt's Doomed Quest to Clean Up Sin-Loving New York* (New York: Doubleday, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Parkhurst, *My Forty Years in New York* (New York: McMillan, 1923), pp. 9-12; *New York Tribune*, Feb 15, 1892; see also *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1982.

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times* Feb 16, 1892; Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 1168.

<sup>7</sup> Zacks, *op. cit.*, p. 3; Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 38; James McCabe, *New York by Sunlight and Gaslight* (Philadelphia: Douglass Brothers, 1881), pp. 474-75; Richard O'Conner, *Hell's Kitchen: The Roaring Days of New York's Wild West Side* (New York: Old Town Books, 1958): 100-01.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

<sup>9</sup> Elias Nason and J. Frank Beale, *Lives and Labors of Eminent Divines* (Forgotten Books, 2014; originally published, 1895), p. 19.

<sup>10</sup> *New York Times*, Oct 27, 1890.

<sup>11</sup> *New York Tribune* Aug 6, 1891.

<sup>12</sup> Jesse T. Todd, Jr., "Battling Satan in the City: Charles Henry Parkhurst and Municipal Redemption in Gilded Age New York," *American Presbyterians*, vol. 71, no. 4, p. 243.

<sup>13</sup> Rachel Shteir, *Striptease: The Untold History of the Girlie Show* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Morris, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-40; Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York* (New York: Thunder Mouth Press, 2001), pp. 158-59; Thomas De Witt Talmage, *The Masque Torn Off* (London: Richard D. Dickinson, 1879), pp. 30, 33.

<sup>15</sup> Zacks, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Gardner: 68; see MeasuringWorth at <http://www.measuringworth.com>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 15-16; Burrows and Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 1168.

<sup>19</sup> Gardner, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-26.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-30.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 65-66.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-61, 70.

<sup>26</sup> Parkhurst, *op. cit.*, 15-19; *New York Tribune*, Mar 13, 1892; *New York Times*, March 14, 1892.

<sup>27</sup> *New York Times*, April 2, 1892. Following a December 1895 police raid that closed down numerous Tenderloin brothels, Mrs. Nellie Parkhurst and her husband welcome a group of desolate prostitutes into their home for tea and toast; Sloat: 184-85.

<sup>28</sup> *New York Trib*, Mar 26, 1892; *New York Times*, Mar 26, 1892; *New York Times*, April 7, 1892; *New York Trib*, May 9, 1892.

<sup>29</sup> Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. : xxx.

<sup>30</sup> Todd, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

- <sup>31</sup> Gilfoyle, *op. cit.*, p. 301; Parkhurst, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
- <sup>32</sup> O'Connor, *op. cit.*, p. 82.
- <sup>33</sup> McCabe, *op. cit.*, p. 490; O'Conner, *Ibid.*, pp. 92-94]
- <sup>34</sup> Morris: 221; Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, pp. 227-28; Gilfoyle, *A Pickpocket's Tale*, pp. 118-20.
- <sup>35</sup> Gilfoyle, *A Pickpocket's Tale*, p. 119.
- <sup>36</sup> Morris, *op. cit.*, pp. 221, 223-24; Zacks, *op. cit.*, p. 63.
- <sup>37</sup> Gordon Hendricks, "The History of the Kinetoscope," in *The American Film Industry*, ed., T. Balio (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), pp. 50-51.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.
- <sup>39</sup> David Nasaw, *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusements* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 154.
- <sup>40</sup> Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York: McMillan, 1909), p. 86.
- <sup>41</sup> Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 286-87 n 10.
- <sup>42</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, in *Illuminations*, ed., Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 218-19; Steven Luber, *Infoculture: The Smithsonian Book of Information Age Inventions* (Boston, MA: Houston Mifflin, 1993), p. 51; Joseph Slade, "Eroticism and Technology Regression: The Stag Film," *History and Technology* 22 (2006), vol. no, 1: 28; Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *The Legs of the Countess* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 296; Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT October Books, 1990), pp. 17-18; Elizabeth Hovey, "Pornography," in *The Encyclopedia of New York City*, ed. Kenneth T. Jackson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 924.
- <sup>43</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. (New York: Basic Books, 1994), p. xxx.
- <sup>44</sup> Asbury, *op. cit.*, p. xxx.
- <sup>45</sup> Chauncey, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-39.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.
- <sup>47</sup> Morris, *op. cit.*, p. 219;  
[http://www.outhistory.org/wiki/New\\_York\\_State\\_Investigation\\_of\\_New\\_York\\_City:\\_May\\_16,\\_1899](http://www.outhistory.org/wiki/New_York_State_Investigation_of_New_York_City:_May_16,_1899)
- <sup>48</sup> Bishop, *op. cit.*, p. 18.
- <sup>49</sup> Gilfoyle: 639-40; Burrows and Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 1164; Todd, *op. cit.*, p. 249.
- <sup>50</sup> Bishop, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
- <sup>51</sup> Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Henry Holt, 1998), pp. 48, 39, 54, 55, 97 and 142; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), p. 3.
- <sup>52</sup> Kathy Peiss, "Charity Girls and City Pleasures," *Magazine of History*, Vol. 18, No. 4, Sex, Courtship, and Dating (July 2004), p. 15; Bishop, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.
- <sup>53</sup> Gardner, *op. cit.*, p. 24-26.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 36-39.
- <sup>56</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 1220-34.
- <sup>57</sup> Gilfoyle: 299.
- <sup>58</sup> Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 70.
- <sup>59</sup> David J. Langum, *Crossing Over the Line: Legislating Morality and the Mann Act* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 183.
- <sup>60</sup> Todd, *op. cit.*, p. 246;  
<http://physics.bu.edu/~redner/projects/population/cities/newyork.html>.
- <sup>61</sup> Todd, *op. cit.*, p. 248.
- <sup>62</sup> Thai Jones, *More Powerful Than Dynamite. Radicals, Plutocrats, Progressives, and New York's Year of Anarchy* (New York: Walker & Company, 2012). Pp. 37-39.
- <sup>63</sup> Zacks, *op. cit.*, p. 14.
- <sup>64</sup> Zacks, *op. cit.*, p. 86.
- <sup>65</sup> Zacks, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

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<sup>66</sup> J. [John W.] Raines, "The Raines Liquor-Tax Law, *The North American Review*, vol. 162, no. 473 (Apr., 1896), pp. 481-85.

<sup>67</sup> Edwin R. A. Seligman, ed. *The Social Evil*, a report originally prepared under the direction of The Committee of Fifteen (1902)(New York: G. P. Putman's Sons, 1912).

<sup>68</sup> Gilfoyle, *op. cit*, p. 304.

<sup>69</sup> R.F. Baumeister and J. L. Butler, "Sexual Masochism: Deviance without Pathology," D. Richard Laws and William O'Donohue, eds., *Sexual Deviance: Theory, Assessment, and Treatment* (New York: Guilford Press, 1997), p. 225.