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MR. SHAW ON FILM CENSORSHIP

"EFFICIENT FOR EVIL"

REASONS FOR REFUSING A LICENCE

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir,—May I call attention to the latest example of the manner in which our censorships, with the best intentions, safeguard the very evils they are supposed to prevent?

A lady has made it her business to help homeless and penniless people who spend their nights in the streets and make the Embankment a general address for misery. She has found that many of the men have tramped up to London in the belief, not exactly that its streets are paved with gold, but that there is plenty of employment to be had here at higher wages than in the provinces. She also finds that young women come up in answer to advertisements in helpless ignorance of the existence, much less the address, of the Travellers' Aid and other Societies for the protection of women and children from White Slave agents.

The lady has taken a very sensible step, the only effective one within her means. She has had typical nightly scenes on the Embankment filmed and set in the framework of a simple story showing a miner leaving his family to better them by seeking work in London, and presently finding himself on the Embankment desiring nothing more than to get back to his home and his old job in the country. The film also shows a girl decoyed to London by a White Slaver's advertisement. She is fortunate enough, after being drugged and carried on board a ship bound for the Continent, to escape before anything worse has happened to her, and to be directed to the proper quarter for protection and advice.

Obviously the exhibition of such a film throughout the country would be extremely unwelcome to the White Slavers, and would check the flow of unwanted men to London. To the stupefaction of the lady and her charitable colleagues the film was refused a licence. They came to me and put the case before me. As I knew by what I had seen of licensed films that it was quite possible to exploit night scenes and incidents of the White Slave traffic in an objectionable way I asked to see the film. I was at once invited to a private exhibition, only to find that even this could not be given without permission. Finally, however, I saw it where the Censor's writ did not run; and I can testify that there is not an incident or suggestion in it that could not be exhibited in a Sunday school, the pictures being as innocent in their execution as in their intention.

I asked what reason the examiners who do the work of censorship had given for their decision. I was told that they had relented so far as to license the story of the miner "for adults," which seemed to me madder, if possible, than its total prohibition. But they would not license the story of the girl on any terms, their reason being that they thought domestic servants were badly wanted in London, and that the film might discourage girls from coming to help London out of that difficulty. How girls could be discouraged from travelling by an advertisement of the means by which they could do so in safety was not explained.

As I never make a public grievance of a matter that can be quietly remedied by a reasonable representation to the responsible authority, I persuaded the owners of the film to say nothing until I had written privately to Mr. Edward Shortt, who lately succeeded the late T. P. O'Connor as Film Censor. As he had survived a term of office as Irish Secretary, and had acted as Home Secretary subsequently, I had no doubt that his experience and good sense would at once convince him that his examiners had blundered, and that he would set matters right without any public fuss.

His reply is that he has now seen the film, and agrees with the judgment of the examiners, not for the reasons given by them, but because it is a rule of his department to allow no reference to the White Slave traffic or to drugs. I could hardly believe my eyes as I read this amazing statement of policy. The most lavish and costly displays of the allurements held out by White Slavers to young women, and by them to their patrons, are licensed without demur, and thereby effectually protected and sanctioned. Licensed scenes of what is politely called exhibitionism have become cinema specialities: one which I cannot describe in your columns was shown recently in a first-rate West End picture-house. But when a film is made to show girls the risk they run of being kidnapped by White Slavers, and to make known to them the address of a society which exists to make such kidnapping impossible, the Censor suppresses it. It is as if the railway companies were to exclude the staff of the Travellers' Aid Society from their arrival platforms whilst giving every facility to the White Slave agents on the very acceptable condition that the real nature of their business must not be disclosed.

I know, of course, that as the series of considered moral judgments for which the public look to the Film Censor are absurdly impracticable, his business reduces itself to the enforcement of a few rules of thumb through which any unscrupulous person can drive a coach and six, though they are intolerably obstructive and injurious to conscientious authors; but this particular rule seems to me beyond all bearing except by those who have pecuniary interests in the White Slave and drug traffics. It convinces me, as one who frequents picture-houses, and knows the lengths to which they go in the direction which the censorship exists solely to bar, that it is quite useless for good and terribly efficient for evil.

As Mr. Shortt cannot be questioned in Parliament, which has no control of him or his emoluments, and as my private appeal to him has been in vain, I am obliged to resort to the Press through its most influential organ.

The title of the film is *The Night Patrol*; and the lady's name is Miss Baxter.

Yours truly,

G. BERNARD SHAW.

Seen by Ch: 17/2

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