

The Comstock Walls

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In the months of spiritual gestation, Margaret saw her battle as against one individual, Anthony Comstock. Almost single handedly he had built the legal walls which in her view preserved a medieval ethos. They not only barred scientific knowledge, but maintained the old taboos of ignorance and superstition.

Since sex, according to Comstock, was a subject neither discussed nor thought of by nice people, he relegated it to the gutter, where it continued to flourish in the form of brothels, prostitution, and the white slave traffic in young girls. In 1912 America's foremost woman, Jane Addams of Hull House, had shown the link between these institutions and poverty in her book, *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*. Organized vice always depended for its recruits on the daughters of the poor. Comstock attacked neither the guilty institutions nor their backwash—venereal disease, defective children, and crime. Instead, he vented his wrath on the crusaders against them for using frank words, such as "syphilis."

Margaret saw her mission as breaching the Comstock walls and letting in the twentieth century. To her it was self-evident that she spoke for the future, for reason, and for mute, helpless mothers. Comstock spoke for the past and for the persecutors who harried the weak.

Certainly Comstock spoke for the past, but Margaret vastly oversimplified his character. A displaced Puritan, he embodied both the worst and best of seventeenth-century New England. He was irreproachably devout, hard-working, chaste, and incorruptible. His

enemies tried to discredit his honesty, but they never could. Probably he was as dedicated to his cause as Margaret Sanger was to hers.

They had another bond, the impact of their mothers' untimely deaths upon their respective careers. Both women came from long-lived stock, but were worn out by constant pregnancies and drudgery. Mrs. Comstock, a farmer's wife, bore ten children and died when Anthony was ten years old. Mrs. Higgins had eleven and died in her forties. Because Margaret was a girl and went at once into nurses' training, she soon connected her mother's many pregnancies with her frail health. Had the boy Anthony, more than three decades earlier, possessed such insight, he would never have made war on a policy that might have saved his mother's life.

Anthony Comstock was born in 1844, in New Canaan, Connecticut, of Anglo-Saxon, Protestant stock. He sucked in Bible stories with his mother's milk, and a half century after her death, he claimed that the whole purpose of his life was to honor her. He also said that he was in the service of the Lord.

At twenty he enlisted in the Union Army to take the place of his brother, killed at Gettysburg. Although he saw little of the war, his journal shows that he waged many battles with the Devil. Indeed, young Anthony seldom compromised and in spite of the anger of his fellow soldiers, he always poured his whiskey rations on the ground. Apparently the only time that he tasted liquor, except for medicinal purposes, was as a boy when he drank some of his neighbor's homemade wine, for which his father beat him.

After the war he found both work and a wife in New York. The bride's father was a Presbyterian elder, which in the eyes of his son-in-law no doubt outweighed his business failure. Certainly there was no worldly reason for marrying Maggie, who was "a little wisp of a woman," ten years his senior and already a bit worn out. Perhaps he was still thinking of his mother. In any case, he was always loyal to Maggie, even when her bedridden sister moved in with them.

Since Maggie's only child soon died, he adopted a little orphan, whom he had found on one of his raids. Unfortunately, she was

feeble-minded, although her father never seemed to notice it. From all reports, he was both patient and kind to the three rather dilapidated females who made up his household. Anthony Comstock, the large man with the Atlas shoulders, the bull neck, and the choleric temper, found savor in an otherwise drab life by battling the sins of others.

As a boy, he had started battling when he broke into an unlicensed shop to destroy the liquor. After marriage, in the same spirit, he resolved to be a good citizen by personally enforcing the law in Brooklyn, where he was living. Tersely he noted in his journal that "crimes stalked the streets, while the police winked." As in his youth, the illicit traffic in liquor was his main concern until he recognized a greater evil.

Long aware that young businessmen took pleasure in lewd picture cards, he finally identified them as the cause of youth's growing depravity. This led to his true vocation. One day, professing a taste for "French cards," he bought some and then within the hour returned to the shop with a policeman to arrest the owner and seize his stock. This was Comstock's debut, and over the next decades he merely enriched his technique with decoy letters, false signatures, impersonations, and an army of spies. To the end of his days he loved sleuthing, relishing above all personal encounters and the arrest of the enemy.

To understand Comstock's drive, one must return to his Civil War journal. His battles with the Devil had largely concerned masturbation and lascivious fancies. Taking the Bible literally, he believed that "whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her, has committed adultery with her already in his heart," and that the Lord hated "A heart that deviseth wicked imaginings." By equating a lustful thought with the deed, Comstock vastly increased the importance of pornography.

Comstock's authorized biographer, C. G. Trumbull, delves even deeper into his hero's past. His mother had once discovered that some farm hands—"vicious fellows"—had introduced Anthony to "lines of temptation" that proved harder for him to overcome than anything he learned later. Her grief so impressed her son that forever after he wanted to battle vicious fellows who polluted other

boys' minds and habits. The memory of his mother inspired his books, *Traps for the Young*, and his crusade against pornography. He brought to the crusade his juvenile pugnacity and an arrested development.

There were many people in the eighteen-sixties equally appalled by the "French cards," which the recently incorporated New York Y M C A called "feeders for brothels." This organization took the lead, in 1868, in securing passage of a state law that banned lewd materials. When Comstock conceived a new plan of attack, he turned as a matter of course to the Y M C A, whose president saw eye to eye with him. The latter appointed a committee for the suppression of vice, which for a while financed Comstock's work, although not quite openly. Few wanted to stand with Comstock in all of his slugging campaigns, and in the end the Comstock fund-raising committee became autonomous.

Up to this time the churches had usually served as censors, a function which to some extent the courts later assumed. However, in 1842 Congress had barred the importation of foreign pornography. After the Civil War it took a second step, banning all obscenity from the mails. Nevertheless, pornography continued as a growing, profitable business.

Comstock resolved to close the legal loopholes. Although no one openly defended commercialized obscenity, large interests, including the press, which carried covert advertisements, had a stake in it. But the great hurdle for Comstock was to secure a hearing in a short session of Congress while the spotlight was on the financing of the Union Pacific Railway—the notorious Credit Mobilier affair, in which many congressional members were involved. Comstock's problem was to make the post card scandal seem as important as the national political scandal. With his rudiments of genius, he decided to show them, not tell them.

He spent weeks lobbying key persons, senators, committee chairmen, and the Vice President, but relied mainly on visual aids. Since his bill had been referred to the House Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, he persuaded the chairman to set up a full display. This exhibit was either so convincing or so titillating that it was taken to the very floor of the House where it remained through-

out one memorable day In the Senate, the Vice President obligingly opened his office for the show To some whose probity was being questioned, it was a welcome chance to join in a pious rejection of obvious filth In any case, the bill passed the Senate in February, and on March 1 the House suspended the rules to pass it without a roll call

Most of the bill dealt with the material displayed, which was described in Section 211 as "obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy and indecent" All of this was barred from the United States mail and from express and common carriers Advertising, which had been the main sales channel, was prohibited So disgusting was most of the display that few members objected to a blanket suppression, although later some questioned it

What was not commonly understood was the addition to the bill of the phrase "prevention of conception," which included information as well as contraceptive devices also termed "obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy and indecent" The original bill had exempted physicians, but the senator in charge offered an amendment to strike out the exemption On the Senate floor, when questioned about his amendment, he evaded the matter In neither house was there any discussion whatsoever of this section, which would govern American policy on contraception To this day Congress has not changed it

President Grant signed the bill on March 3, 1873 In the next years there was some dismay over the law, and shortly before Margaret Sanger's birth, her father's hero, Colonel Ingersoll, presented a petition calling for its repeal "Mental, moral and physical health and safety," he urged, "are better secured and preserved by virtue resting upon liberty and knowledge than upon ignorance enforced by government supervision" But the law remained

Comstock's legislative triumph was followed the next day by a more personal one when he was named special agent, later inspector, for the Postmaster General This gave him authority to make arrests and confiscate illegal material In itself, his law was a major victory, but it also led to twenty-two little Comstock or state laws, modeled on the federal act This was not all To the previously passed New York obscenity law, he secured an amendment to cover

contraceptive materials Eighteen other states then passed laws based on New York's

Comstock followed up his legislation by organizing cooperative groups to suppress vice, such as the famous New England Watch and Ward Society and others with headquarters in Chicago, St Louis, and Cincinnati Now he had a network of vigilantes to crack down on evildoers Toward the close of his life, summing up his achievements, he claimed to have caused the conviction of enough persons to fill a passenger train of sixty one coaches, sixty of which contained sixty passengers each with the sixty-first almost full Furthermore, he had destroyed 160 tons of obscene material Earlier he had boasted of driving fifteen persons to suicide

Comstock's assessment was not applauded by some of the public His zeal for retribution sounded sadistic A decreasingly Puritan people were shocked at the inspector's power to invoke final earthly judgment on his fellow citizens Granted that most of the material that he destroyed was revolting, as were most of the careers that he ended, nevertheless, it had become obvious that Anthony Comstock could not distinguish between pornographic, medical, sociological and aesthetic works He could not draw the line between artists, educators, humanitarians and the lowest smut-purveyors Among the 3,760 persons whom he bragged of convicting, were many who should not have been there

A tragic case was that of the Midwesterner, Dr Elliott, who had publicly denounced the ban on contraception, before receiving two letters Allegedly these were both from married women, one of whom had a syphilitic husband and the other, two children Dr Elliott granted their pleas and sent them contraceptive information For this Comstock got him sentenced to six years at Leavenworth When he emerged, Dr Elliott was a broken old man

For himself, Comstock's most costly fumbles were in art censorship, as in the case of "September Morn" Since this painting had won the medal of honor in the Paris Spring Salon of 1912, the American firm that reproduced it put a copy in its New York display window Comstock always maintained that the most sacred thing in the world was "a maiden woman's body," but that it must not be "denuded" When he chanced to view this chilly but demure

young girl in the window, he ordered the picture removed, as one unfit for the eyes of passing school children. The press seized on his quaint ban, which became the more droll when he volunteered that the picture had hung in "the saloons of Paris."

George Bernard Shaw had an early altercation with Comstock, whom he mistakenly blamed for removing his play *Man and Superman* from the public library. "Comstockery," he quipped, "is the world's standing joke at the expense of the United States." The inspector, who had never before heard of Shaw, rejoined by calling him a smut dealer, and later tried to suppress *Mrs Warren's Profession*, a very serious play. All his life, Shaw told the press, he had been trying to awaken the public conscience, while Comstock had been examining and destroying tons of indecent post cards. Still, he could not fight Comstock "with the American nation at his back and the New York police in his van." Yet fighting Comstock, with the American public at his back and the New York police in his van, was precisely what an unknown young American woman aimed to do.

Comstock's mother had taught her boy a verse that always inspired him. It went

Build it well, whate'er ye do
Build it straight and strong and true
Build it high and clean and broad
Build it for the eye of God

So he had built the Comstock walls. Margaret Sanger's mission was to demolish those high, strong walls to let in the light. She did not underestimate her task, nor want to be a martyr, but she was ready to do what was needed. She believed that her cause was that of human freedom. If she could make a breach, she would not quarrel with her punishment.