ANTHONY COMSTOCK IS TOO BUSY TO SUPPRESS BERNARD SHAW

By Charles Darnton

IT was a case of Mahomet and the mountain. Mr. Anthony Comstock declined with thanks to go to Shaw, so I took Shaw to him.

"Matinee!" said Mr. Comstock, as if the word were strange and wicked, when I proposed a jolly afternoon at the Hudson Theatre. "No, I'm much obliged; I'm going to court."

I was aware that Mr. Comstock's straight and narrow path leads daily to the Criminal Courts Building, but I had hoped to lure him from it just for once. I felt that a couple of hours in a comfortable theatre would be a pleasant change for him. Mr. Comstock certainly looks as if he needed a change. Suppressing vice six days a week and setting fresh traps for the wicked on Sunday must get to be a dreadful bore. But my cordial and well-meaning efforts were all in vain. For once the free pass had lost its power. I wept inwardly and slunk out of the rigid headquarters of the Society for the Suppression of Vice with a sinking feeling that I had lost the time of my life. It would have been devilishly delightful to sit beside the great, good man while Tanner told Violet of the nobility of motherhood with or without; to hear him rumble; to feel him shake; and perhaps to have him create a scene not down on the innocent, corset-ed programme.

But I went with at least Mr. Comstock's promise to read "Man and Superman;" so came again and hopefully left Shaw to his fate. The blue-bound book looked very blue indeed when it was so ruthlessly abandoned. I felt just a bit ashamed to leave it there among the works of evil Mr. Comstock was suppressing. Then came the glad, sustaining thought, "But he can't suppress Shaw; no one can!"

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"WELL, what do you think of it?" I inquired the next day.

"H-m-m," faltered Mr. Comstock, "I'm hardly in a position to judge. I've been so busy (he had just suppressed that dramatist of the human form divine, Mr. McFadden) that I haven't had time to read all of it. There's no mistake, though, about this Shaw fellow being clever, and some of the things he says are very pleasing. I'm not going to condemn him (I didn't want him to condemn poor Bernard!) on what I've read, but I can see how this 'Human and Superhuman' might seem very different on the stage."

(I'll wager Mr. Comstock never had a harder time suppressing anything than I had suppressing a laugh at his "Human and Superhuman.")

"Yes, he has a bright mind, but what impressed me most was his egotism. I've never met so egotistical a person."

"Would you like to meet Mr. Shaw?"

"Yes, I should. I'm not afraid to meet any one. I have no quarrel with him. What I object to is his attack on the work of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, which he is pleased to call 'Comstockery.' All I've got to say to him on that score is that I've been in this work of 'Comstockery' for thirty-three and one-third years, and he needn't imagine that he can drive me out of it now by coining a word and throwing it at me. I'm judging Mr. Shaw by what he said in his letter: 'Everybody knows that I know, better than your public library officials, what is proper for people to read, whether they are young or old.

"That sentence shows his overbearing bombast and vanity. The Society for the Suppression of Vice in New York City, whose agent and representative he sneers at, doesn't object to Mr. Shaw, provided he confines himself and plays to his own country. If Great Britain can stand his bloated egotism, the United States of America will not interfere, except to extend cordial sympathy to our sister nation, and generously do all we can to prevent him from wasting his energies on this side of the water."

"His plays are making money for him here," I ventured.

"I didn't mean wasting his energies in that way. I mean wasting them in trying to down 'Comstockery.' If Mr. Shaw's works will produce the effect he says they will, that is, 'Can, and probably do, do harm to weak and dishonest people,' then he places himself in direct opposition to the fundamental principles of good government. In our country, starting with the 'Beer Cases in Massachusetts,' the 'Slaughter-house Cases in New Orleans,' the 'Fertilizing Cases of Chicago,' the 'Laundry Cases of San Francisco,' the 'Hoboken Land and Improvement Cases of Hoboken, N. J.,' the 'Farmers' Loan and Trust Company of New York,' and the 'License Cases of Kansas,' all of which went before the highest court of this nation, it will be found that health and morals stand before the court like bride and groom and seem joined in bonds inseparable. Mr. Shaw may be a clean writer; but he may not put upon paper improper thoughts to be spread before the youth of this nation. His mind may be the nursery for corroding thoughts, but there is no justification for his spreading his imaginings before the youth of this great land, where the tendency of these things is to corrupt and degrade them in mind and thought. Evil thoughts are procursors of evil deeds. The principles which have been invoked by the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice seem to have the effect upon this Irish bull that a red flag has upon the beast of the field."

What would you give for a front seat when the "Irish bull" tosses this on his horns?

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THE temptation of Anthony to bear to one statement by the wily George Bernard was too strong for him to resist. This further extract from the letter of the Society's agent was read to me:

"Shaw's plays are not for our people. We have our own playwrights, who write for our own people. We have our own problems, and we do not need Shaw to come from his island to help us to solve them. We have our own Society for the Suppression of Vice, and we do not need Shaw to come from his island to help us to suppress it. We have our own Anthony Comstock, and we do not need Shaw to come from his island to help us to suppress Comstock."

"I'M MUCH OBLIGED TO MR. SHAW."

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