

Born in Dutchess County, New York, in 1841, Ophelia Amigh married in 1859 and moved to Iowa. In May 1861 she became a Civil War nurse for the Third Iowa Volunteer Infantry, in which her husband was also serving as a soldier. Her time was divided between field service and a hospital in St. Louis. After the war she returned to New York for fifteen years and spent part of that time in charge of a reformatory for boys. In 1882 she moved to Chicago and helped manage the Erring Woman's Refuge. In 1894 she was appointed Superintendent of the State Training School for Girls, then a Chicago institution, but which was soon relocated west of Chicago to new and larger facilities in Geneva. Under her care, the school grew into a renowned educational and reformatory institution.

Given her vantage point at the State Training School for Girls, Amigh became a noted expert on how young girls were being duped and then forced into prostitution. Below is a chapter she contributed to a book on the subject—the book was published in 1910.

Ophelia Amigh on the White Slave Trade

(“More about the Traffic in Shame” by Ophelia Amigh; found in *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls, or War on the White Slave Trade*, Ernest A. Bell, ed., G.S. Ball, 1910, pages 117-126.)

One of the most disheartening things in the work of protecting innocent girls and restoring to useful lives those who have been betrayed from the path of right living is the blind incredulity of a very large part of the public. There are hundreds of thousands of women in the homes of this country who know as little of what is going on in the world, so far as the safety of their daughters is concerned, as so many children. They are almost marvelously ignorant of the terrible conditions all about them—and all about their children, too.

Of course, their blindness to these awful actualities makes them more comfortable, for the time being, than they could possibly be if awake to the perils which beset the feet of their daughters and the daughters of their friends and neighbors. But there is no permanency to this sort of peace—and thousands of mothers of this class are annually brought to their senses and recalled to earth by discovering that their own daughters have made the fatal misstep and have passed under the brand of the pariah. The awakening of such parents comes too late, generally, to do much good. Not always, but in a majority of cases. Many, many times after I have related to a casual woman visitor the simple details of a typical "case" brought here to the State Home, the caller has exclaimed: "How terrible! I didn't dream that such things were going on in the world!"

Now, if you had something of great value which needed to be protected day and night, would you select for such a task a blind watchman? or one who was firmly possessed of the idea that there was really no danger, no occasion for watchfulness? Certainly not! There is nothing in the world of such priceless value to a father or a mother as the honor, the purity, the good character of a daughter. No parent will possibly question this statement. And still there are many thousands of parents entrusted by Providence with the safe-keeping of this priceless treasure who are themselves in the position of discharging that great responsibility with closed eyes, with dull ears and with a childish belief that there is no real peril threatening the safety of their daughters! These parents do not live on earth,

their heads are in the clouds and their ears are filled with the cry of "'Peace! Peace!' when there is no peace."

As one whose daily duty it is to deal with wayward and fallen girls, as one who has had to dig down into the sordid and revolting details of thousands of these sad cases (for I have spent the best part of my life in this line of work) let me say to such mothers:

In this day and age of the world no young girl is safe! And all young girls who are not surrounded by the alert, constant and intelligent protection of those who love them unselfishly are in imminent and deadly peril. And the more beautiful and attractive they are the greater is their peril!

The first and most vital step for the protection of the girls who walk in this path of pitfalls is to arouse the sleeping watchmen who are, by reason of their parenthood, responsible for the safekeeping of their daughters. This is why the "White Slave" articles by Hon. Edwin W. Sims and others, which have been published in the *Woman's World*, have done great good. They have stirred to a sense of alarm thousands of parents who were asleep in a false sense of security. If they accomplish nothing beyond this they will fully have justified their publication.

But it is evident that they will also result in the enactment of much needed legislation, of laws which will make it easier to convict and punish those who live from this foul traffic in the shame of girls whose natural protectors are asleep in this false sense of security. Of course, practically every state has some laws against that traffic—but I do not know of any state in which the laws now on the statute books are adequate to deal with the situation as it should be dealt with.

One of the things which comfortable and trusting parents seem to find especially hard to believe is the point upon which both United States District Attorney Sims and his assistant, Mr. Parkin, have placed so much stress—the existence of an active and systematic traffic in girls. There is no safety for the daughter of any parents who are not awake and alive to the actuality of this fact!

It is one of the satisfactions of my life to reflect that I have been one of the agents in sending a dozen—perhaps more—persons to the penitentiary for participating in this traffic.

The dragnets of the inhuman men and women who ply this terrible trade are spread day and night and are manipulated with a skill and precision which ought to strike terror to the heart of every careless or indifferent parent. The wonder is not that so many are caught in this net, but that they escape! I count the week—I might almost say the day—a happy and fortunate one which does not bring to my attention as an officer of the state a deplorable case of this kind.

Just to show how tightly and broadly the nets of these fishers for girls are spread, let me tell of an instance which occurred from this institution:

This girl, whom I will call Nellie, is a very ordinary looking girl and below the average of intelligence, but as tractable and obedient as she is ingenuous. She is wholly without the charm which would naturally attract the eye of the white slave trader.

Because of her quietness, her obedience and her good disposition, she was, in accordance with the rules of the institution, permitted to go into the family of a substantial farmer out in the west and work as a housemaid, a "hired girl"—her wages to be deposited to her credit against the time when she should reach the age of twenty-one and leave the Home.

She had been in her position for some time and was so quiet and satisfactory that one Sunday when the family were not going to church the mistress said:

"Nellie, if you wish to go to church alone you may do so. The milk wagon will be along shortly and you can ride on that to the village—and here is seventy-five cents. You may want to buy your dinner and perhaps some candy."

When Nellie reached town and was on her way past the railroad station to the church, the train for Chicago came in, and the impulse seized her to get aboard, go to the city and look up her father, whom she had not seen for several months. She went to the city and had hardly stepped from the train into the big station when she heard a man's voice saying: "Why, hello, Mary!"

Instantly—foolishly, of course—she answered him and replied:

"My name's not Mary, it's Nellie."

"You look the very picture," he responded, "of a girl I know well whose name is Mary—and she's a fine girl, too! Are any of your folks here to meet you?"

"No," she answered. "My father's here in the city, somewhere, but he doesn't know I'm coming. I've been working out in the country for a long time and I didn't write him about coming back."

Her answers were so ingenuous and revealing that the man saw that he had an easy and simple victim to deal with. Therefore his tactics were very direct.

"It's about time to eat," he suggested, "and I guess we're both hungry. You go to a restaurant and eat with me and perhaps I can help you to find your father quicker than you could do it alone."

She accepted, and in the course of the meal he asked her if she would not like to find a place at which to work. "I know of a fine place in Blank City," he added. "The woman is looking for a good girl just like you."

"Yes, I'd be pleased to get the place, but I haven't any money to pay the fare with," was her answer.

"Oh, that's all right," he quickly replied. "I'll buy your ticket and give you a little money besides for a cab and other expenses. The woman told me to do that if I could find her a girl. She'll send me back a check for it all."

After he had bought the ticket and put her aboard the train going to Blank City, he wrote the name of the woman to whom he was sending her, gave her about \$2 extra and then delivered this fatherly advice to her:

"You're just a young girl and it's best for you not to talk to anybody on the train or after you get off. Don't show this paper to anybody or tell anybody where you're going. It isn't any of their business, anyway. And as soon as you get off the train you'll find plenty of cabs there. Hand your paper to the first cab driver in the line, get in and ride to Mrs. A_____'s home. Pay the driver and then walk in."

Believing that she was being furnished a position by a remarkably kind man, the poor girl followed his directions implicitly—and landed the next day in one of the most notorious houses of shame in the state of Illinois outside of Chicago. How she was found and rescued is a story quite apart from the purpose which has led me to tell of this incident—that of indicating how tightly the slave traders have their nets spread for even the most ordinary and unattractive prey. They let no girl escape whom they dare to approach!

It may be well and to the point to add, however, that two other girls who had been in care of the State Home were found to be in the same house to which the girl had been lured, and they were also recovered.

Almost at the beginning of my experience I received a penciled note which I have kept on my desk as a stimulus to my energies and my watchfulness along the line of checkmating the work of the white slavers. It is very brief and terse—but what a story it tells! Here is a copy of it with the substitution of a fictitious name:

"Ellen Holmes has been sold for \$50.00 to Madame Blank's house at ____ Armour avenue."

The statement was true—and the man who sold her and the woman who bought her were both sent to the state penitentiary as a penalty for the transaction!

Another fact which the public finds hard to believe—especially the public of mothers—is that girls who are lured into the life of shame find it impossible to make their escape, and that they are prisoners and slaves in every sense of the word. I recall one instance of a girl from a good home who had fallen into the hands of a white slave trader and been sold to a house in the red-light district. Her people were frantic over her disappearance and made every possible effort to locate her, but without success. Several months after the excitement and publicity aroused by her disappearance died away, a newsboy who had delivered papers at her home—which was in a very good residence district of the city—happened to be passing along a cross street of the red-light section—just on the fringe of it, in fact.

Suddenly he heard a tap on the window, looked up and saw the anxious face of the lost girl. Then she disappeared.

Knowing the story of her strange disappearance, he hurried straight to her home and told of his experience. Instantly the father secured officers and the little newsboy led the posse back to the house, in the window of which he had caught a glimpse of her face. They raided the place and rescued the girl. The story of the terrible treatment which she had received cannot be told here. It is enough to say that she had been held as a captive, imprisoned as much as any inmate of a penitentiary is imprisoned, and that if the friendly newsboy had not happened to pass as he did, the window from which she was looking out, she would undoubtedly be there today or in some other similar prison of shame through the process of exchange.

One other matter in this connection needs to come in for clear and decisive emphasis: the fact that the runaway marriage is the favorite device of the white slaver for landing victims who could not otherwise be entrapped. These alleged summer resorts and excursion centers which are well advertised as Gretna Greens, and as places where the usual legal and official formalities preliminary to respectable marriage are reduced to a minimum, are star recruiting stations for the white slave traffic. I have never seen this point brought out with any degree of clearness in any article, and I earnestly urge all mothers to give this statement the most serious consideration, and never to allow a daughter to go to one of these places on an excursion or under any pretext whatever, unless accompanied by some older member of the family. And even then there is something unwholesome and contaminating in the very atmosphere of such a place.

Do you think that I overstate the perils of places of this kind? Of these gay excursion centers, these American Gretna Greens? I hesitate to say how many girls I have had under my care who were enticed into a "runaway marriage" at these places—and then promptly sold into white slavery by the men whom they had married, the men who married them for no other purpose than to sell them to the houses of the red-light district and live in luxury from the proceeds of their shame.

Let every mother teach her daughter that the man who proposes an elopement, a runaway marriage, is not to be trusted for an instant, and puts himself under suspicion of being that most loathsome of all things in human form—a white slave trader!