



The Black Candle (selected passages)

by Emily Murphy

The Black Candle (published in 1922) was written by Canadian author, women's rights activist and judge, Emily Murphy. While the book is mostly about opium it also contains early 20th-century claims about cannabis and cocaine. In the preface, Murphy explains how she acquired her drug expertise – her official position (as Police Magistrate and Judge of the Juvenile Court at Edmonton) gave her access to unique information, addicts and dealers through which she learned the causes of people's downfall and potential rehabilitation strategies.

[Cannabis] is not really new but, as yet, is comparatively unknown in the United States and Canada, although three of the American States – California, Missouri and Wyoming – have legislated against its use, the authorities and police officers generally being woefully ignorant of its nature or extraordinary menace.

Hashish or hasheesh is the Arabic name and means literally "dried herb." It may be smoked, chewed or drunk. Our English word "assassin" comes from this word.

This Indian hemp is used chiefly in Asia Minor, India, Persia and Egypt, but is being increasingly used on this continent, particularly by the Mexicans, who smuggle it into the United States. Last year fifty-four persons were convicted for using, or peddling it in Los Angeles, California.

According to Charles A. Jones, LA Chief of Police: "Addicts to this drug, while under its influence, are immune to pain, and could be severely injured without having any realization of their condition. While in this condition they become raving maniacs and are liable to kill or indulge in any form of violence to other persons, using the most savage methods of cruelty without, as said before, any sense of moral responsibility."

"Dr. Warnock in The Journal of Mental Sciences for January, 1903, states that acute mania from hasheesh varies from "a mild, short attack of excitement to a prolonged attack of furious mania, ending in exhaustion or even death." He describes the hasheesh user in the following words: "They are good-for-nothing lazy fellows who live by begging or stealing, and pester their relations for money to buy the hasheesh, often assaulting them when they refuse the demands. The moral degradation of these cases is their most salient symptom; loss of social position, shamelessness, addiction to lying and theft, and a loose, irregular life makes them a curse to their families."

The Black Candle ends with an apologia to "addicts" and, ultimately, a handful of lines from a Walt Whitman poem that Murphy claims reflects her own heart:

*From all the rest I single you out,
Having a message for you
Softly I lay my hand upon you
I am more than nurse, more than parent or neighbour
I absolve you from all except yourself.*