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THE

PHYSICAL EVILS

ARISING FROM THE

PREVENTION OF CONCEPTION.

BY

THOMAS E. McARDLE, A.M., M.D.,

Washington, D. C.

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Much has been said and written concerning the very prevalent evil of criminal abortion. Prizes have been offered by various Medical Associations for essays containing some practical means of preventing so hideous a crime. The profession is fully alive to the heinousness of the offense. The public weal demands that it should be stopped, for it saps the very root of the family, the foundation of society. But is there not another evil of common practice, a degree less heinous, it is true, which calls for more than passing notice from all physicians, but especially from gynecologists and obstetricians? I refer to the wide-spread and prevalent effort to prevent conception by methods harmful in their nature and criminal in their intent. It is a sad reflection on our boasted progress that such practices should be most common in those nations which are considered the highest in the scale of civilization. It is the product of luxury, the outgrowth of sensuousness. The boastful citizen of the cultured class cries out against the brutal destruction of infantile life as practised by the outside barbarians, and yet he does not hesitate to wantonly commit the crime for which Onan was so severely punished. It would be interesting to discuss this question from a moral standpoint, but it is better, perhaps, to leave that phase of the subject to

[1] Read before the Washington Obstetrical and Gynecological Society, May 18th, 1888.

the clergy who should have the courage to tell their people from the pulpit that the adoption of criminal means to prevent conception desecrates the sanctity of a man's home and makes him false to himself and the woman he has sworn to cherish. But let us rather consider this disagreeable subject from a scientific point of view, and having proven that the prevention of conception by criminal means is a violation of the physical as well as the moral law, let us endeavor, if possible, to discuss some means of stopping a sin crying to nature for vengeance.

There is, of course, no positive means of obtaining any reliable statistics as to the frequency with which married or unmarried people endeavor to prevent conception. But it seems to me that an altogether too large number of husbands and wives are seeking to prevent additions to their families, by means both criminal and hurtful. The young physician is tempted by bribes and blandishments to produce abortions. To his credit be it said, he rarely fails. As time goes on and he begins to get a family practice, he will frequently be importuned to give some specific by which man and wife may enjoy the lustfulness of the flesh and yet not reap the consequences. Five women of this city pooled their issues and sent five dollars to an impecunious but ready-witted scoundrel who advertised to give for that sum a certain means of limiting the number of their offspring. He earned his money, but think you they followed his advice, when he told them that abstinence from their marital privileges was the only sure means of preventing conception. That is one of the strongest points we can make when advising our patients against the adoption of criminal methods in order not to have children. Abstinence is the only sure means. They may try every other method that the ingenuity of prudence or bestiality may suggest, and yet find their efforts not only uncrowned by success, but most hurtful to their physical selves.

"There were Malthusians before Malthus," yet it is to be doubted if ever before the enunciation of the views and maxims of that revered student of political economy there were published in so open and shameless a manner, the various means thought to be potent in preventing impregnation. The blame for this may not, perhaps, be justly laid at the door of Malthus, because his panacea for the prevention of over-population was marriage late in life. He would not have marriages

take place until the period of greatest fecundity had been safely passed. But close in his footsteps came other pseudo-philosophers, male and female, each with a certain means, learned from man's lowest nature, by which the pleasures of the flesh could be indulged in without fear of consequences. It is a matter of curiosity to read that the male [1] favors withdrawal, whilst the female [2] contends for some occlusion of the uterine orifice which will not prevent full enjoyment of the sexual act. But every physician knows that both these means have been tried and both have failed too frequently to gain the stamp of certainty. And so with many other methods that the fertile French brain has devised.[3] It would be wearying and disgusting for me to give you in detail the various means of preventing conception which the courtesy of Dr. Wise, at the Library of the Surgeon General's Office, has enabled me to study during the past few months. Suffice it to state that the best medical authorities have proven to their own satisfaction, at least, that these various methods of preventing impregnation have for their results only moral and physical evils to the sensual individuals who indulge in them. Thomas [4] says, the workings of nature in the matter of conception, as in all other physiological processes, are too perfect, too accurately and delicately adjusted, not to be interfered with materially by the clumsy and inappropriate means adopted to frustrate them. It will not be wondered at that the means adopted for the prevention of conception are often productive of uterine disorder when the harshness of some of them is borne in mind. West [5] considers the imperfect performance of sexual intercourse one of the frequent causes of uterine engorgement, and of hypertrophy of the cervix. Bergeret [6] records nine cases of acute metritis with two deaths. According to Goodell,[7] he has so often seen like results from like causes, that, when called to a case of pelvic inflammation he takes for granted that means have been adopted for preventing conception.

Conjugal Onanism so deteriorated the health of two of my patients, husband and wife, that it was a source of great joy to

[1] Robert Dale Owen. "Moral Physiology," London, 1844.
[2] Annie Besant. "The Law of Population," London.
[3] Bergeret. "The Preventive Obstacle," Trans. N. Y., 1870.
[4] Thomas. "Diseases of Women," Philadelphia, 1880.
[5] "Lectures on Diseases of Women," p. 80.
[6] Loc. cit.
[7] "Lessons in Gynecology," Philadelphia, 1887.

me when accident led to impregnation, followed in due course of time by a healthy baby, the delight of the household. Though there are now three instead of two in the family, the doctor's bills are lessened in amount, for father, mother and child are well and happy. Such cases are far from rare. But the principal object sought in bringing this subject to the attention of the society is to get an expression of opinion from its individual members, as to the evils likely to result to women from the adoption of preventive measures.

"In man," as Barnes very forcibly shows, "the ejaculation of the semen ends his physiological duties; but a woman to complete the cycle of reproduction, must pass through conception, gestation, and parturition." "Hence," Goodell adds, "a disregard for these requirements of her very nature will assuredly predispose to uterine disorders. Marriage without children acts like a slow poison on the constitution of most women.

It is not to be wondered at that the woman should suffer more than the man, for greater fraud is practised against her. She is teased and not gratified, and not only once but many times, possibly as often as once a day. The generative organs become engorged with blood, but are not permitted to enjoy the relaxation consequent upon the full completion of the marital act. This engorgement may lead to undue local nutrition, and diffuse growth and proliferation of the connective tissue may take place. Hence, the uterine walls become thickened and dense, and the nerves compressed. Of course pain, tenderness, and a sense of bearing-down will be the result. Flexions and versions may be consequent upon the engorgement. If even the careful examination by a physician of the pelvic organs by abdominal manipulation or by vaginal palpation is capable of setting up a peri-uterine inflammation, how much more so the constant habit of marital masturbation? Some have even gone so far as to say that uterine cancers seem sometimes attributable to the pernicious use of preventive measures. But be that as it may, we all know that no woman can continue to disregard a truly physiological law and retain the blessings of health. The nerves become shattered, and if she should be so fortunate as to contract no serious womb-trouble, yet she will suffer from all the nerve-counterfeits of uterine diseases so admirably described by Goodell. And, perhaps, it may be permissible for me to borrow one of his well-wrought sentences, though to use it,

perhaps, in a sense different from that he intended. We must not forget "that the imponderables are great forces in nature; that a single mental stimulus to unstable nerve molecules will awaken many reflexes," and we must not overlook "the tyranny of woman's over-sensitive organization, and underrate the influence of nerve-perturbations or of psychical disturbances." But if no greater evil than sterility itself were to ensue, would not that be curse enough? And it is the common belief of gynecologists that preventive measures long indulged in will result in sterility. It is my belief that people most frequently resort to those methods for the sake of economy, intending to have children when sufficient wealth is accumulated to justify them in raising a family. But, alas, when the money has been gained, the woman's generative apparatus, so constantly abused, has lost its potency. She is no longer able to gratify the maternal yearnings natural to every true woman's heart. Thus are we compelled "to leave her to heaven," like Hamlet's mother, "and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge, to prick and sting her."

But can anything be done by us to save women from the uterine disorders so probably consequent upon the adoption of methods to prevent conception? We all, of course, tell those who consult us that there is no specific for the prevention of conception other than total abstinence. But are we emphatic enough in our assertion that such measures are harmful to soul and body? Do we draw for them a sufficiently vivid picture of the ills likely to result from such pernicious practices? Do men love their wives so little that they are willing to run the risk of entailing upon them a life of mental and physical suffering? It seems to me that it would not be difficult to convince a loving wife to stop such practices if she could only be taught that they were harmful to her husband. It will be a happy day for society when some nimble wit shall discover an effective means of convincing doctors and patients that "there are no harmless methods of thwarting nature's plain intention;"[1] when husband and wife will meet "to endear each other," as Jeremy Taylor quaintly puts it, and not "to adjust accoutrements, to compound antidotes, and to consummate, with prearranged precautions and cold-blooded calculations, a union which, for its perfect mental and physical fruition should be spontaneous and unrestrained."

[1] Goodell, "Lessons in Gynecology."