

THE TRI-STATE MEDICAL JOURNAL

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ORIGINAL ARTICLES.

PROSTITUTION: ITS CAUSE, AND THE RELATION OF THE MEDICAL PROFESSION TO ITS ABOLISHMENT.

BY J. F. PERCY, M. D., OF GALESBURG, ILL.*

A LONG the centuries since time commenced to record the acts of men and women, there has been one figure that has always stood out with startling prominence against the sky of human progress. No nation having a page of history but has from the first to the very last line felt the awful power of its presence. Master minds in all ages have

*President's address read before the Military Tract Medical Association, 1892.

stood powerless before this figure,—that of the woman in scarlet, whose voluptuous arms have reached out and gathered the whole world in her amorous embrace. Law has made her very life a crime ; religion has caused it to be a stench in the nostrils of God and man, while philanthropy, the offspring of both law and religion, has stood helpless before this creature of fate, pleading with the world to throw its mantle of charity over her monstrous vice. The history of prostitution to-day is but a repetition of what it was yesterday, while its history, written yesterday, is an exact reprint of what it was thousands of years ago. And all its sin and misery and horror find their one fertile source in the depravity of men. Women have no place as a factor in its continuance, they only bear the burden of its odium. As I write thousands of women and girls are being drawn with relentless fury into the vortex—but few escape.

I offer no apology for bringing this subject before you. It is one of transcendent importance. It is high time that the Medical Profession awaken to the fact that it owes a duty to the world much more important than simply modifying the results of disease. To do this is good, but it is a very small part of our opportunities. Moral vices are plunging the nations of the earth into crimes far worse in their effects, present and ultimate, than scores of the diseases for which we have remedies. Has the physician no treatment for this foul sore? Familiarity with crimes against nature has developed in us, not pity always, but more often a contempt, especially for those subjects suffering from these various manifestations due to an abnormal but ignorant abuse of the sexual instinct. As a result, we find our profession in a state of practical apathy towards this greatest of evils. This is discreditable ; we pay almost no attention to moral crimes. Instead of being the teachers of the public on this and kindred subjects, we seem to be afraid of public opinion. A public opinion of this sort, and the ignorant bigotry on which it grows, should be crushed out, and whose business is it to do this but ours?

It is my purpose in this paper to treat the subject of prostitution,

First, From the standpoint of the causes for its existence, and

Second, The relation that we, as physicians, bear to its abolishment.

I have already mentioned that this disease of the body politic is due to moral depravity. But we would make a great mistake if we pass this first cause of human depravity without in some way trying to fathom the reasons for its being the first cause. It is a hard thing to fasten the most heinous crime of life upon one's own sex, without at least trying to find some extenuating reasons for its existence among them. Do vast numbers of men become partners to a crime as far reaching in its results as this one, wilfully ? There exist to-day hundreds and hundreds of thousands of white

slaves, more degraded in their bestial slavery than were the black women of the South before the war; and these outcast women plead with me, as a representative of the medical profession, that I may answer this question in such a way that something may be done for their relief.

It would prove interesting reading could we, in our study of this question of prostitution, determine how much of it is due to an hereditary tendency. I mean not only in families but in a broader sense than this, as when the family line is lost in that of the state or nation, giving rise to marked national characteristics. When we think of France for example, the fact of her illegitimate births enters with the thought. When France thinks of America, she only remembers that we are a nation of abortionists. When either thinks of Ireland, it is with the knowledge of her sexual chastity. What determines these various phases of national life? Why should enlightened England, ruled by a Christian queen, spend money from the treasury of her kingdom to employ prostitutes for the sexual gratification of her soldiers in India,—and that too with an elaborateness of detail that beggars description. Fine buildings, elegantly furnished, and in the midst of fine parks, with music and flowers and bright colors, within which reside debauched women whose sole business is to debauch men, and who are well paid for doing it by an enlightened Christian nation. And why, on the other hand, should infidel France, the home of art, of beauty and of literature, be the breeding ground for the world of the worst that the world has in manners, in morals, and in literature? This nation that prides itself on the fact of having solved the question of prostitution by state regulation, as the result of which we hear the French prostitute spoken of as though she were a prime article in the marts of the world. It is to this nation that the advocates of the state regulation of vice point in their attempts to prove that the only way to deal with prostitution is to regulate it.

While speaking of the regulation of prostitution, I will, in passing, say this:— That wherever attempts of this kind have been made, they have proved a failure. In Paris, where it has been given the most complete trial, only one-eighth of the prostitutes have been registered, leaving all the rest to prey upon the community with this marked disadvantage that those not registered, and who become diseased, will not report for medical treatment for fear of being referred to the authorities; and thus they go on not only suffering themselves, but spreading venereal diseases everywhere. On the other hand, those that are registered are indulged in intercourse so much that a severe and fearful gonorrhoea is almost certain to develop. Try what we may, science has not yet found a way by which cohabitation with a harlot is safe. And now what can be said of our own land? As a nation are we less amorous than those, who, like us, are rich and powerful? Are we committing any crimes against nature? Crimes that will in years to come

point us back to the time when we should have avoided them? Will we ever drift into a condition that will make us a second Roman Empire, where idleness and vanity, with luxuriance and consequent voluptuousness, will send us into a decline that portends our fall?

These are grave questions, for our land is rich and prosperous; all lines of activity are opening up to the masses. With a restless energy that is characteristic of us as a people, we are taking hold of everything that will add to our national strength, but with it there is creeping in this vice of prostitution and it is to be the intellectual and moral index of our nation, as it has been of every people and nation since history began. Our moral horizon is not clear. The vices of our large cities are appalling; whole streets are given up to prostitution while everywhere public solicitation is permitted. By this means alone thousands of both sexes are ruined every year. But recently a great railroad corporation refused to permit a society that had established a rescue mission near its depot in one of our principal cities, to prosecute its work until the promise was made that no report of what it should learn would reach the outside world.

This vice does not exist alone in the cities, for statistics show that the greater number of fallen women come from the country; and this is one of my reasons for bringing this subject to your notice, that those who practice in the country may feel that they have a duty in this matter which is important.

Civilization, the world over, has dealt with prostitution in three ways: First, By ignoring its existence. This has been followed,

Second, By attempts at suppression, and Third, these attempts at suppression have always ended in licensing the vice. At the present time our nation is where other civilized nations began in their dealings with prostitution. When the national conscience is awakened, as it will be after the question is forced upon its notice, our nation, as other nations have done, will attempt to suppress the evil. And it is fair to presume that we will like them fail in the attempt; the outcome being that we shall eventually license that which has proved to be the greatest evil that a nation can possess. Lecour, the chief of the regulation department in Paris, said, long ago: "The evil must be overcome by moral, not by legislative means." Did the purpose of this paper permit, I would like to give at least a brief review of these different methods and the results of their operation; suffice it to say that when tried they have all failed. I will, however, digress a moment to answer an objection that is always brought forward when this subject is discussed. The objection is that to do away with prostitution would result in a condition worse than when it is among us; for those that hold this belief say that it would not be safe for any virtuous woman to walk the streets

unprotected. It is a sufficient answer, I think, for me to state that the very opposite of this is true; for by looking up the authorities on this subject, I find that it is in towns where the evil trade between men and women is regulated, not checked, that licentiousness grows rampant, and that vice assumes forms of new atrocity. It is in Brussels and Paris that no young woman can walk, even in day-time, without danger of insult.

I cannot speak of this subject from the standpoint of its relation to state and national law. This is a very important phase of the question, for then the protection of the young could be considered. Are you aware of the fact that in the state of Illinois there is no law on its statute books that will, in the slightest degree, guard young girls from being led into a life of prostitution?

Not long since I was appealed to, because of my position as an officer in a charity organization, to invoke the aid of the law to prevent a girl fourteen years of age from being forced by her parents into a life of shame. The attorney of the society filed the necessary papers with the court in which the case was to be tried and was informed that the law under which he made them out, could not be construed to apply to the case in question; and furthermore, that there was no law in Illinois that would cover that case, or similar ones. The case was such a pathetic one that the Judge of our Circuit Court, after fully investigating the matter, advised the society to kidnap the child. Here then was an instance where the need of rescuing a young girl from parents who already had two daughters leading the lives of prostitutes was most urgent, yet no means but illegal ones could be used in that state to accomplish anything for her good. I tell you that it is facts like these, and I shall try to make some of them prominent as I proceed, which have taught me that in this fair land of ours there are evils that must be talked about, and that must be studied into, in order that something in the way of their relief may be accomplished. Is it strange that I should look to the medical profession to give its aid to this good work, and through it to all those who are longing for the dawn of the day in which civilization can boast that within its realms everywhere women are free. Is prostitution the result of ignorance? Do we find it only among the vile and the vicious—the submerged tenth? Let us see. Catholic Ireland, with all its ignorance and consequent misery and destitution, for a period of ten years between 1878 and 1888 had a rate of four and one-tenth of illegitimacy to each one thousand of her unmarried women; while High Church England, including Wales, had a rate of fourteen illegitimate births to each one thousand of her unmarried women; and Presbyterian Scotland leads the list with a rate of twenty-one and five-tenths illegitimate births to the same number of her unmarried women. So that every year in Scotland, there are five times the proportion of bastards that see the light in Ireland. Without knowing the

statistical history of other countries we are apt to conclude at once that the low rate of illegitimacy is due entirely to the religion of that down-trodden island; but if we look at the statistical history of other Catholic countries, we will at once see that this religion is impotent in controlling the rate of illegitimacy in Catholic Austria, where the rate of births due to illicit love to each one thousand women in the year 1878 was one hundred and forty, or about thirty-three times as many bastards as are born in Ireland. Again we see that it cannot be due to ignorance, for in the northeastern section of Scotland, where the high rate of illegitimacy, which I have quoted exists, only six per cent. of the married women were unable to write. And I might add that in the northwestern division of Scotland where the rate of bastardy is much lower than in the northeastern section, 64 to 1,000 unmarried women, that the women are so ignorant (statistics of 1878) that only thirty-eight per cent. of the whole number who married could sign their names.

And so I might go on enumerating the various reasons that have been given besides the two already referred to,—ignorance and lack of religion, as a cause of prostitution, and I find that each writer on this subject has had some pet theory that in his opinion would explain the existence of this crime against women. One author finds idleness to be the great cause; another vanity; another that the absolute neglect of children by parents is a fruitful source of it; another believes that the stern demands on the part of society, which almost compels a young married couple to continue the social status of their parents, thus preventing marriage at a proper age, will explain a fruitful source of it. Still another, and he is not without a great mass of facts on his side, lays the blame at the door which permits the unequal relations between the sexes, especially in the business world. Others again find that wrong ideas regarding love; unpleasant home relations between husband and wife, which result in divorce, and which lead by precept and example to moral weakening of the children; want of education in children with reference to their sexual natures; attempts on the part of the state to regulate that which was never intended, and which never can be regulated by law, these causes and theories, as well as many more, all have had their supporters. But they are only part of the truth; one or more of them exists in the life history of every prostitute. As an absolute explanation of the existence of prostitution in its entirety they will not do. Remember, I am looking for a cause; for something that will tell us whether the vast numbers of men who are responsible for the continuance of this vice, are wilfully responsible.

Am I too bold in stating that, in my firm belief, the legions of men who father this vice, are not wilfully responsible for it? Is blind and palsied ignorance to be blamed when it is both blind and ignorant? What do the aggregate of men the world over know of their sexual selves? Need I

attempt to answer this question in the face of our daily experience with men and women? Sexual ignorance in relation to sexual laws is the proper answer to this riddle.

Who is to blame for this universal but pitiable ignorance which gives rise to conditions fostering these social agonies, these slimy horrors; welling up as if from the bowels of hell, touching with their rotten influence far more homes than alcohol! At the risk of being branded as an outcast from the profession with which I love to labor, I declare that our profession is mainly responsible for this condition. Our attitude as a body toward all the social vices of the human race has been simply to ignore them. We have failed in our duty as educators of mankind regarding its greatest and most blessed function of life-procreation. As a result of this sexual chaos we have on every side—"Masturbation, prostitution, sodomy, prevention of conception, seduction, rape, abortion and the numberless diseases that follow in their wake." The thought of these festering seas of iniquity and our responsibility toward them make me tremble when, by way of comparison, I think of Him who once traveled up and down the hills of old Judea teaching as well as healing man. This One whom men in love and awe ever since have called the Great Physician, was the first to teach by one grand object lesson the truth that woman was something higher and something better than a concubine.

I am well aware that many, in answer to a charge such as the one just made, will say that the whole subject is such a nasty one, with ways so many and various of being defiled, that no one, not even physicians, can be blamed for letting it alone. I grant that this is a question that everyone cannot handle; because some are sure to be losers if they do. But for the majority of the medical profession to make such a plea as this, in the face of the experiences that we have almost daily with disease, and especially when some of the worst forms of it that we treat are due to this very vice, such a plea, if made at all, comes from an unfortunate ignorance of our duties and relations to the world at large, and is unworthy of us and our calling.

And now that I have indicated the most prolific source of this moral disease, viz: ignorance of things sexual on the part of all mankind, and our great responsibility for this ignorance, bear with me while I specify more directly some of the causes that keep the streams of these vices full as they flow with ceaseless murmur in and among the children of men.

In this connection it will be profitable to speak of what society is pleased to call, Love. Erroneous notions regarding this ancient monster, backed by the ignorance which serves to keep them alive, has probably ruined as many innocent lives as any force of which civilization can boast. The numbers of sexual crimes that are committed with Love as the pretence for their practice

is appalling, and if I accomplish no more in this paper than to arouse in you a willingness to help combat the ignorance which confounds Passion with Love, I shall be well satisfied. The vast majority of legalized marriages the world over, but especially in America, are nothing more or less than cases of legalized prostitution. True, there is not the danger of police raids and similar inconveniences, but the murder of the innocents born and unborn, the disease and the general demoralization of social life are all there. The great majority of men everywhere will gratify their sexual desires at any cost. It matters little whether it be with wife or harlot. They are not to blame—the greater number of them have never been taught to control the sexual instinct, indeed it never occurs to them that it was ever intended to be controlled, but like an inordinate desire for strong drink, passion goes unbridled until it becomes master of the man.

The burden of this ignorance of sexual things among men falls most heavily on women. John Stuart Mill understood this when he said that "The gratification of man's sexual desires is a degrading slavery to a brute instinct in one of the persons, and, most commonly in the other, helpless submission to a revolting abuse of power." A woman must submit to the brutal demands of her husband; there is no universal sentiment that will help; certainly there is no court that will protect her. Is it any wonder then that the offspring of such unions become weak, passionate creatures—a prey to all sorts of nervous ailments and that sexually they show no stability of character? Is it strange that the product of such wedlock often becomes prostitutes and employers of them? If men knew the difference between love and what results from allowing a natural instinct to run wild, it would not be necessary for Dr. R. H. Gerrish to say,—*"Take away the sexual element from love, and you remove the most potent inducement to marriage."* Nor would South Dakota have its present record of seven thousand divorce cases in three years. To-day blind passion, to-morrow physical and mental demoralization followed by dislike and distrust—perhaps divorce. But if not this last, a social state follows from the first two which will account in a great measure for the condition which I have already referred to as one of legalized prostitution. In thousands of homes,—indeed in the majority of homes throughout all Christendom, the woman of the house is simply a kept woman, a concubine.

Deny these truths, if you will; but prove that they do not exist, you cannot. Of the pregnant women that consult us, the one who can give the date of conception is an anomaly most rare. Why? Because intercourse is so frequent that she has no means of knowing, and does this prove anything? Yes. "That sexual intercourse is indulged in simply for the gratification of an animal passion." I verily believe that there are more tears shed over the "accidents" of married life, to use a popular expression, than

fall when death removes some loved member from the midst of the family. Conception and pregnancy, as it is looked upon by the majority of women, is one universal regret for the accident that has happened. In fact, as far as birth is concerned, we are a nation of regrets as well as accidents. And yet we prate about love. How many times do we hear the question asked, "Is she pleased?,"—when women learn that one of their number is pregnant. Would these things be true if men really knew that to give themselves up to unrestrained passion is an injury not only to those of them who are thus moral law-breakers, but through them to their posterity? You cannot make me believe that vast numbers of men will work directly against their own best interests. The whole history of man goes to prove that he is not in the habit of doing it. Would he change the rule in this, the most important interest that he possesses? Would he with wilful persistence go on demanding that women, those of them with the women half gone, that they promenade our streets and decoy the young of both sexes into a life that is the beginning of an eternal death? He would not do this were he not ignorant of the fact that syphilis, and leprosy, with the vast numbers of hereditary defects and the greater part of the woes and heartaches of the world, are due to his sexual acts.

This question of love, or rather this question of sexual gratification, for that is what the world really means when it talks of love, is one of the most important that begs the attention of civilized countries to-day. As an organized body, as a profession, as a mighty force in the growth of the world, we must take up this, our neglected duty. We must be teachers as well as healers. And we can fulfill our mission in no way better than by inculcating among all classes of society that the divine element in life,—Love, is not present among them, and that so holy a thing can never come into the home of this or any nation so long as it is to be sacrificed upon the altar of sensual passion.

My paper has already exceeded the limits necessary to retain your interest, but the subject is so broad and its importance as a practical matter to the world so great, providing our profession will but interest itself in it,—that at the risk of wearying you I will, as briefly as possible, urge, as I see them, the means that are in our power to abolish prostitution as a degrading factor in the world's growth. In attempting this, and even by writing this paper at all, I know that I expose myself to the charge of being visionary; and to reproachful, perhaps insolent criticism. I shall not be surprised, certainly not disturbed if I am. It is my duty; and this same duty has called members of my profession to a fate far worse than can come to me from contumelious criticism. It is my misfortune if I shall have over-stepped "the imperative demands of propriety," yet if that means that I have only disturbed "conventional prejudices," I shall not regret having read this paper

in your hearing. To abolish prostitution from our land, what is necessary?

There can be but one answer to this question. Reform the individual. But when the individual is ignorant of the fact that he needs reforming, what are we to do? Enlighten him! And who can do this but medical men! If we look at this subject from every possible point of view, individual reformation will be found to be the most important means through education of throttling this great public shame which permits of the enslavement of women, and, at the same time, protects the libertinism of men. In other words, "we must pay more attention to the individual; to the private conscience."

That public agitation of questions like this is of value when rightly presented, I will not deny. But it must be done by men and women who are qualified first by a deep knowledge of the subject, combined with a practical common sense that will be explicit enough to leave no doubt of the meaning intended, yet so guarded as not to offend in its application; above all, there must be a deep and pure love of all that is best for the human race. First, then, individual reformation is to be accomplished, whenever opportunity offers by a process of pure education on all matters relating to sexual life. Again to do all possible to establish a custom that will, at least, "care for our young until after eighteen years," for before that time thoughtless ignorance and blind impulse of the physical beings are generally stronger than their intellectual and moral faculties. And in this line I plead with you to do all possible to change the pernicious fashion in our American life that permits the mischievous relations between the sexes after the engagement, which is supposed to be the prelude to a happy and healthful marriage. The American parlor after dark is the open door to the possibility of all forms of sexual excess. Young women, leaders in our prayer meetings, shining lights in the Christian Endeavor Societies, do not think it wrong to sit in the laps of their best young men until the small hours of the morning. They do this under the mistaken, but hellish, notion that it is love. But worse than this is the blissful unconsciousness of danger with which the parents of these very children hide their faces from these possible crimes. In our day when the prospective husband visits his prospective consort, her parents are given to understand that they must exile themselves to the remotest part of the house. The doors are closed, and the young man finds everywhere a guarantee that he will not be disturbed while he proceeds, should passionate impulse so direct, to familiarize the young woman with methods, which, if persisted in, will destroy her forever. Again, we can walk the streets of our cities, as well as those of any country village, especially after dark, and see numbers of boys and girls under twenty years of age promenading together, often with arms locked, and by suggestive acts advertising the fact that they are on the road that leads they know not

whither. In the face of facts like these is it any wonder that, as far as prostitution is concerned, Christian countries show no better record than those which are under the darkness of paganism? The ignorance which makes it possible for them to be true has existed so long that universal moral weakness is the result. I regret that these things are so universally true. I wish that the truth was so overwhelmingly against me that this body could protest as a unit against my statements. I do violence to my nature in recording these common facts that for them, with your help, I might suggest some remedy. I believe in the innate nobleness of men, and the God-given purity of women, but I do not believe that nobleness and purity can have any solid foundation when only backed by what we to-day consider an education. Examine any of the text-books on human anatomy or physiology to be found in our schools and universities, and, as far as the text and illustrations are concerned, one would think that the generative function was performed in some form of patent incubator outside of the human body.

These deplorable facts are made more so when we consider that physicians are often members of the Boards of Education in the cities and towns in which they live. In the light of such facts as these is it strange that girls arrive at the age of puberty without any knowledge of menstruation, or that both boys and girls have any but a perverted notion of the strange fancies and new sensations co-incident with the awakening of their sexual lives? How easy it is with a soil like this to plant vicious thoughts and have them grow up into deeds that are due, not only to the vice from which they spring, but into crimes against society and the state! The belief is all but universal among both youth and men that to restrain their sexual desires will make them impotent, or, if not that, illness will supervene, even insanity. These are solemn facts, and great is my responsibility in unfolding their nature.

Out of respect for your kind patience, I should close my paper now, and I will do so after briefly referring to a subject that is of too great importance to be neglected in a paper like this. Our relation to its abolishment comes in the line of our individual duty as educators, and in no one thing is our responsibility greater. I refer to what the French, who, when they speak of American women, hold up their hands in horror, pointing the finger of scorn at what they are pleased to call the American sin, viz: abortion. On the other hand we, in America, have only a contempt for our sister who lives across the broad waters when we hear of the number of her illegitimate children. The measure of the sin in its inception is the same in both cases. The difference is that in our own case the innocent life is destroyed before our neighbors know of its existence, while with our sisters in France the life is not destroyed at all. We have not done our whole

duty, when we refuse to produce an abortion. We must educate the world up to the point where it will know that to do a thing like this is a most heinous crime. "Physicians meet in practice women who would scorn to speak evil against a neighbor, who are tender and kind, leaders in social and even religious life, who are above suspicion as to chastity, yet who do not hesitate to murder their own children, providing only, they be small enough. They do this not only once but repeatedly; and not only do they commit this crime, but talk about it very unconcernedly, or engage in disseminating a knowledge of the work among friends as earnestly as they would work for a supper for the benefit of a hospital, kindergarten, or the far distant heathen. They would fear to reverse the hands of their watch, but would break the laws of nature in their own human mechanism, a hundred fold more delicate, complicated, and precious."

And in the distressing cases where through ignorance, some girl, confiding in the promises of the fellow she has been taught by custom to call her lover, is betrayed, let us remember that there are state laws that will look after the betrayer, to protect her, and it is our duty to give this information. I know of a number of happy homes, as the world goes, that have grown out of compulsory marriages like these. Again, to abolish prostitution from our land, let us strive with all the power of our might to break down that hellish idea that because a woman has once stepped from the paths of virtue, she has no more claims on our sympathetic charity. This kind of puritanism has driven, and is driving scores of women into the ranks of prostitution.

"Deal gently with the erring
Ye know not of the power
With which the dark temptation came,
In some unguarded hour.

Heir of self-same heritage,
Child of self-same God,
She has but stumbled in the path
Thou hast in weakness trod."

Again, let us make it a heinous crime to be a moral law-breaker. Then, again, let there be made one standard for men and women alike, for man is the aggressor and woman only the victim. Finally, let us remember that men are not the only class fit to pass on moral questions.

Thus, in an imperfect way, I have tried to bring before you some thoughts on this great evil, and I trust that my doing so will be productive of good to a class that need our help, if not our sympathy. Nothing will ever come of this question until it has been discussed over and over again,

and from all sides. Moralists and others can do nothing with it, without the help of the medical profession, but "whoever lends the slightest aid in stemming this mighty tide, does an invaluable service to his fellow-men."

†In the preparation of an essay such as this, one receives suggestions from many sources all of which it would be almost impossible to acknowledge. It would, however, be unfair not to mention in this connection the unique and valuable work entitled "Illegitimacy and the Influence of Seasons upon Conduct" by Albert Leffingwell, M. D., of Oxford, England, from which I have quoted the statistics to be found in this paper relating to illegitimacy in England, Ireland, Scotland and Austria.