

Remarks of Dr. Geo. B. Peters, of Hardeman : on his bill to prevent the marriage of cousins of the first degree, in Senate, December 9, 1859.

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REMARKS OF
DR. GEO. B. PETERS,
OF HARDEMAN,

On his Bill to Prevent the Marriage of Cousins of the First Degree,

IN SENATE, DECEMBER 9, 1859

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APR. 10. 1916

Surgeon-General's Office

Mr. PETERS said: In the remarks which I shall make, let it not be forgotten, that in enumerating all the ills and afflictions following in the course of affiliated marriages, I do not by any means hold that these marriages are the only sources of those melancholy maledies. My object is to show that the offspring of such incestuous intercourse are more obnoxious to such casualties, and that the percentage is larger among such persons than among the fruits of ordinary marriages.

We find among the transactions of the American Medical Association, a lengthy report embracing eight hundred and seventy-three observations of marriages of consanguinity of various degrees of relationship, furnished from the following States to-wit:

12 by Maine, 9 by Vermont, 44 by New Hampshire, 87 by Massachusetts, 35 by Connecticut, 51 by New York, 34 by Pennsylvania, 33 by New Jersey, 7 by Delaware, 2 by Maryland, 24 by Virginia, 11 by North Carolina, 3 by South Carolina, 30 by Georgia, 22 by Alabama, 14 by Mississippi, 7 by Arkansas, 53 by Tennessee, 137 by Kentucky, 47 by Missouri, 16 by Illinois, 73 by Indiana, 18 by Ohio, 34 by Michigan, 42 by Wisconsin.

Of these there are ten cases of brother and half sister; twelve of uncle and niece, or aunt and nephew; sixty-one blood relations, who were also descendants of cousins; twenty-seven of double first cousins; six hundred and first cousins; one hundred marriages of second cousins; thirteen of third cousins, and thirty of first cousins without any special history.

This report goes on to show that the offsprings of such marriages are by one hundred per cent more liable to consumption, scrofula, epilepsy, convulsions, hydrocephalus, and other hereditary diseases, than the offsprings of persons who are not relatives.

Of the ten marriages of brother and half sister there were thirty-one children born in the aggregate; of that number twenty-nine were defective, to-wit: nineteen were idiots, one epileptic, five scrofulous, and eleven others deformed; one family of five children all idiots, one of seven children, six could not speak so as to be understood.

Of the twelve marriages of uncle and niece, or aunt and nephew, there were in the aggregate fifty-three children, of this number forty were defective, to-wit: one deaf and dumb, three blind born, three idiots, one insane, one epileptic, thirteen scrofulous and the other nineteen defective, were deformed in some way.

Of the sixty-one marriages of cousins, who were themselves the offspring of kindred parents, there were born 247 children. Of these there were defective, 128, to-wit: 9 were deaf mutes, 12 born blind, 31 idiots, 4 insane, 4 epileptic, 44 were scrofulous and 23 deformed.

Of the twenty-seven marriages of double first cousins, there were 154 children born. Of these, there were defective, 42, to-wit: 2 were deaf and dumb, 2 born blind, 4 idiots, 5 were insane, 2 epileptic, 14 scrofulous, and 12 deformities in some way.

Of the six hundred marriages of first cousins, there were born 2,838 children. Of these 833 were defective, to-wit: 122 were deaf mutes, 59 born blind, 240 idiots, 36 insane, 45 epileptic, and 291 scrofulous, and 136 more or less deformed.

Without continuing the investigation in the widening range of relationship, we find that the per cent of the defective offspring lessens as we get farther from the parent blood. Thus, in the incestuous intercourse of father and daughter, two children born are both deformed and scrofulous. In another, of a man and his grand daughter, produced one child,

an idiot. Here the depravity is complete. In the marriage of brother and half sister, the per cent of defective children is 93.5. In the incestuous marriage of aunt and nephew, and uncle and niece, the per cent is 75.4. In the marriages of cousins, who are themselves the offspring of relatives, the per cent is 53.8. In double cousins the per cent is 27.2. In the marriage of cousins of the first degree, the per cent is 24.0. So that as you recede from the identity of the parent stock, the proportion of the defective decreases.

Of the 125 promiscuous marriages, where the parents were not related, there were born 837 children. Of these 18 were defective, to-wit: 3 were deaf mutes, 1 born blind, 6 idiots, 1 insane, 3 epileptic, 1 scrofulous—a little over 2 per cent.

From the foregoing, it is evident there is the necessity of a law to prevent this alarming state of affairs. Now, sir, the existence of a grievance of some kind or other has been suggestive of every law in force in all governments, and the necessity of ameliorating that grievance, of whatever nature it may have been, has hitherto elicited the attention of Legislatures, and evoked from such bodies enactments to protect the rights of persons and property, to repress crime, to restrain the vicious and to promote the general welfare and prosperity.

But while they have generally given to the the governed a good code of criminal and civil law, they have not been able to prevent the people from going to course their own way, utterly reckless of the calamities which custom has entailed upon the human family by incestuous marriages, thereby tolerating one of the most ruinous evils to mental and physical development that has ever invaded the sanctuary of the domestic relation—one that has been practiced from the earliest history, and which now prevails to a greater or less extent, I believe, in every country upon the face of the globe. The transgressor of divine laws has suspended over him the wrath of Omnipotence; the transgressor of human laws has the penalties of those laws allotted him; the transgressor of hygienic laws promotive of health and longevity, to-wit: the inebriate and the debauchee, must suffer all the ills which follow in the train of a premature old age, inviting an early decay; and the offenders against the laws of propagation (creating the grievance for which this bill is provided,) have visited upon them the terrible consciousness of having riveted upon their unoffending offsprings either physical or mental degeneracy, or both together. And whilst your Legislatures have loaded your statute books with laws providing against all other orders of nuisance, this most important and most neglected subject, affecting the welfare of families and whole communities, has gone on unchecked, spreading its blight through every grade of civilization.

For ages these incestuous marriages (for such they are,) have been spreading their pestiferous canker, and although the frequency of marriages of cousins have familiarized mankind with the unrighteous practice and has somewhat reconciled public opinion to its odium, yet upon a close examination of the subject, they are emphatically more incestuous in cases of double first cousins, than marriages of brothers and half-sisters, a union of which in this age of civilized progress would startle everybody and fix the finger of scorn upon the guilty perpetrators of such acts for life. Nevertheless such marriages of half brothers and sisters, however revolting they may appear, have one half of foreign element in the parties, and are really less incestuous than a union of double cousins, whose parents are brothers and sisters, all their elements consti-

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tuting an identity of constitutional material without one single new accession to aid in reconstructing their progeny.

The moralist who may have been bold enough at any time to arraign the propriety of such marriages as offensive to the laws of decency, the laws of propagation and the laws of propriety, has been paralysed in his efforts by the absence of any legislative enactment to support and give tone to his cause.

This, sir, is a subject which addresses itself to every philanthropist, because the evils following in its train are not to affect the great interests of the country, but they strike deep in the bosom of social intercourse. A subject attended with collateral misfortunes in its wake, more momentous and fraught with direr consequences than any other demoralizing influence with which we have to contend, with the solitary exception, perhaps, of drunkenness alone.

And why is it so? To answer this question involves a brief survey of the laws of propagation as applicable to animals as well as men; in fact men are animals so far as their physical development is concerned, and are obedient in their organism to the same physiological laws as are some of the lower animals. The experienced stock raiser is well aware of the baneful results of breeding stock together through successive generations, and hence the crossing of stock, as it is called, is a universal custom among men of observation, to secure a perfect configuration and a complete development. Degeneracy is an inevitable consequence of breeding stock through the identical parentage and offspring for successive generations; this being conceded as regards the corporeal formation of brutes, which alone is the subject of observation, the brain and nervous system must suffer in common with the general physical fabric. This organ, however, being naturally small in that class of creatures, and the manifestations of its functions, the mind, very feeble, their mental capacity has not been so closely scrutinized until recently, and consequently no estimate has been made of the effects of such breeding on their brain. It is, therefore, an inference, that, as the whole body suffers deterioration, *brain and all the functions are impaired in proportion to that degeneracy—the mind as its function, suffering in a direct ratio with the decreased energy of its proper organ.*

Observation and experience have established these facts beyond controversy, in the history of most mammal tribes, and if a known law of degeneracy holds good in some species and genera by analogy we are led to assume that it is equally true in all of the order.

But, on looking into the laws governing the complete propagation and development of creatures, we find a class of beings below the mammalia, whose organization is not influenced by the same general laws that affect the growth of the higher order of animals. With that class, mingling the same procreative elements together through a continued succession of generations, is a *sine qua non* to their complete evolution, and a continuation of their perfect species and genera. The mollusca and crustacea, and especially the hymenoptera and lepidoptera, including all the varieties of insects, belong to that class.

Thus one part of creation is influenced by such laws as insure perpetuity of their perfect orders, while another part is influenced by another set of laws, apparently subversive of the first set, governing their propagation and development, so that "every living creature follows after the ways of its kind."

Take, for example, some of the insect tribes, which are the very same now in habitudes as they have always been, as far back as we can trace them; their individual and general characteristics are the very same, not having undergone any detriment from mingling kindred stock together in their propagation through the waste of ages. It is a special law of their nature to do so. That whole order is produced by brother and sister through countless generations, without the slightest aberration or deterioration whatever. The male and female silkworm reared from a common parentage, produces a family. In the act of procreation the male dies; when the female deposits her ova she too, having accomplished the great object of her existence (propoga-

tion) dies also, while their ova, like the fabled Phoenix spring into life on the ruins of their ancestry, and develop into the full and perfect being. It is the same case with all the species of the lepidoptera, whose history has been clearly defined: the wasp, hornet, and every species of bee pursue the same course—are propagated by brother and sister—and have not lost for centuries the perfect distinctive organization of their race. The ant and honey bee are the same perfect creatures in conformation and habitudes they were as described in the first account we have of them.

But, when you leave that order and ascend higher in the scale of creatures among the mammalia, where, by a few links, you are introduced to man, the summit and perfection of animal symmetry, a totally different law of propagation comes into action, and instead of a continuous succession of parents, as in the lower order, to preserve identity of tribe and individuality of species, a foreign parent of the same species becomes necessary to perfect the organization of the offspring. Now, although the governing rules which appertain to the lower creatures is not in accordance with the laws applicable to the higher orders of creatures, yet each, in the great arrangement of Providence, is obedient to its own proper and fixed laws, which in every individual tribe is constantly the same.

Examine all the creatures in existence with which our limited knowledge has made us familiar, and a regular concatenation of species and orders are linked together throughout the whole animal world. Beginning in the microscopic sphere, the millions are connected by appropriate links; ascending into the visible world, that succession of connection continues; still rising in the scale of animal existence, organ after organ is added and super added in the different tribes, and all connected together by appropriate intermediate genera. Thus an intermediate race between the fish and the reptile genera, between the quadruped and reptile, between the quadruped and man.

Throughout the vast chain of beings the fundamental laws of propagation, development and organization are, first, those applicable to preservation of the species; secondly, those applicable to physical transmission; and thirdly, those that are applicable to transmission of habitudes.

By the laws to perpetuate the species, an hybrid of any two distinct species is forever debarred from transmitting with a similar hybrid or an original species his individual peculiarity to an offspring, thereby obeying a wise ordinance of nature, preventing a blending of races and a chaos of animal existence. The second law is that of a transmission of physical conformation already discussed.

The third law is the transmission of habitudes. This is an attribute of nervous agency, and upon it depends the energy and vivacity of the offspring, and is always influenced by the relationship of the original stock. Thus a foreign parent by introducing as it were the habitudes of Fauna of other regions, and by bringing a variety of elements together, the vim and activity of the offspring is greatly increased. So also in mingling wild and domestic animal, or animals of the same species from other regions of the earth, blending a diversity of habitudes, the full and complete organization with a perfect manifestation of powers and properties is obtained. But the reverse is the case in blending the same stock successively; there no new element is thrown into the composition of the new being, he is but a repetition, an identity of habitude; a counterfeit, a routine of feelings and a sameness of organization intensified by constant repetition; continues generation after generation until the power of procreative energy is lost and exhausted, and stupidity and degeneracy results of all the manifestations of power, both of a nervous and a physical character.

These positions as to cause and effect may be questionable, but the deplorable facts of degeneracy as set forth, experience has demonstrated to be a fixed law among all the mammal tribes where being after being are engrafted on the same stock, annihilating the agencies necessary to perfection of conformation. This theory may be false, but the facts are notorious. Then how much more striking must be the fact when you ascend to the summit of organi-

zation, where man supremely endowed with a voluminous brain, and whose mental supremacy has made him the monarch of creation and given to him dominion over all things?

Whatever causes endanger the animal development in any species of the mammalia will also endanger that of the human race. Blood bred on kindred blood infuses into the succeeding races a vitiated integral composition and a diseased or diminutive construction, which is equally true in its application to mankind; and whatever produces a diminished volume or force in an organ abridges its power; then the deduction follows that as the brain is an integral part of the general corporeal structure and degenerates in common with the general system of parts, its functions must be abridged and weakened by successive repetitions of the causes of that weakness, resulting in hideous deformities and idiocy.

Why a different set of laws regulate the procreation of the higher order of animals from those which regulate the perpetuity of individuality of the hymenoptera and others lower in the scale of being—why one part of creation is obedient to certain restrictions, and another presenting a defiance to those restrictions and appearing anomalous, is known only to Him whose fiat spoke those general laws into existence.

Our knowledge is confined to the lamentable fact that the penalties of a violation of these laws are made manifest in the awful visitations, upon the fruits of such disobedience, of imbecility and the more hideous curse of mania in its various forms—afflictions imposed no doubt by Providence to prevent the blending of blood with kindred blood.

Go you to your asylums of distress and ponder over the silent fate of deaf mutes, and inquire into the history of a large proportion of them. Go you into the receptacles of the blind, and investigate all the circumstances connected with their dreary pilgrimage on earth, and learn how far a congenital defect of the organ of sight has depended upon consanguine degeneracy. Go to your Insane Hospitals, those abodes of wretchedness and despair, and shudder in sympathizing anguish for your race, as you look on the ravings of one whose peculiar organization has dethroned his reason, and made him a fiend in human shape. Go into every grade of society, and you encounter beings so deformed that they are a nuisance to humanity and a drudgery to life itself. Go into all classes of the community where relatives have married and inter-married for the purpose of promoting mercenary ends, and contemplate imbecility among the adults, and diseases of a congenital character among the youthful. Go every where—mingle with your species—and wherever consanguine marriages are promoted, and lo! what havoc of physical symmetry and perfection! what grievous mental aberrations, and what depravity of all the elements which are calculated to ennoble and beautify!

These are some of the considerations which float on the great ocean of similar facts that present themselves to the philanthropist, invoking him to use all his powers and influence to prevent the ruinous practice of such marriages. They address themselves to the law-maker, and implore him to interpose his influence. The wretched offspring and victims of such marriages cry aloud to humanity to frown them down, and a sympathizing nation is ready to wail over the tardy action of legislative bodies in repressing the custom.

Aye, sir, contemplate nearly "all the evils to which flesh is heir." Visit the scenes of affliction and distress in their broadest phase, resulting from marriages of consins of the first degree, (remember this is a fruitful source, but not the only one.) Look at the epileptic as he struggles in the toils of an appalling malady, originating in a deficient organization of the brain and nervous system, transmitted to him by a kindred ancestry, and over which he has had no control. Look at the convulsed infant, writhing in unconscious agony, which, originating from the same cause, deranges all the vital forces, producing an aberration of intellect, which like the fatal tunic of Hercules, sticks to him for life, and from his cradle to his grave he only vegetates a demented nuisance. Look upon all these penalties of violated law, and ponder well over "grief's forbidden story," as

spoken in the evidences furnished by the unfortunate offsprings of these unhallowed marriages, from their birth to the charnel house, and you are forced to the conviction that blood should not be mingled with kindred blood in wedlock. Again: Contemplate in this connection the consequences of such marriages where they have been encouraged by unreflecting relatives, on account of property; aye, filthy lucre, in order to keep estates in certain family connexions; and behold the withering rebuke of such mercenary motives, and the scathing manifestations of offended nature. The penalties of violated law rest heavily on them. Whole connexions have become so imbecile, that families are met with so feeble in intellect, that not a solitary member could transact the most ordinary business, far less than aspiring to the dignity of managing estates entailed on them by the legitimate laws of descent—nay, more, many of them are either idiots, maniacs or monsters.

But, sir, the subject is not exhausted by this brief review of facts. Individuals and individual communities are not the only sufferers from this evil. Whole nations, in times gone by, have been ruined and debased by the practice and fruits of incestuous marriages. Call to mind the prosperous and powerful kingdom of Syria, after the vast dominions of the Macedonian Conqueror had been partitioned among his victorious Generals.

This country, after some fluctuations, fell to the lot of Seleucius, in whose family the crown remained for some generations, until the imbecility and cruelty of the reigning monarchs, induced the people to invite Tigranes, a neighboring Prince, to take possession of the realm, and then the sceptre fell from the impotent and unworthy grasp of the Seleucidae. The whole history of that race of sovereigns, is a history blackened by moral turpitude, physical degeneracy, and mental peavity. Now, sir, why was this? Why was this magnificent kingdom, placed as it was in the temperate zone of the earth, peculiarly favorable to the development of a complete animal organization for the development of great mental energy, physical prowess, and beauty and symmetry of form, made the home of madmen and monsters? Why was a country in a clime consecrated by Deity, to the production of the most eminent of created intelligences, prostituted to the production of idiots and fiends? Let your history answer. Let the warnings of nature speak out. Let the shades of departed greatness tell you. It was the fruit of consanguineous marriages. For many generations polygamy and incestuous marriages, such as brothers and sisters, nieces and uncles, &c., disgraced and degraded the Seleucidae, engendering among each other mutual hatred, malignant antipathies, infidelity, treachery, treason, and often the most fiendish assassinations.

Aye, sir, in two centuries the Seleucidae exterminated themselves by consanguineous marriages, which brought forth a set of rulers who gloated with indifference on crime, on civil feuds, and on a perfect chaos of iniquities. And thus passed away the glory and grandeur of Syria, from the effeminate control of that debased line of monarchs.* Trace out the succession of Kings in that far-famed country, spread along the fertile deltas of the Nile. A country inhabited by a race of people, who from admixture with that nation took on the beautiful mould of the Grecian. They were endowed with great vigor, both of body and mind, and devoted to all the industrial pursuits of life, with an indefatigable zeal for commercial enterprises, and were characterized by a laudable patriotism, and a generous love of country. The arts and sciences were most assiduously cultivated, and all the improvements that most exalt, ennoble, and adorn the mental and physical constitution of man were held in idolatrous estimation. The learning of that people was made proverbial by sacred history, and their prowess was extolled by every tongue and in every country, as being far in advance of their national contemporaries.

But in an evil hour that empire of wealth and wisdom fell into the possession of Ptolemy Soter, another of Alexander's Marshals.

Then began that reign of polygamy and incest

which disgraced the escutcheon of that wonderful nation. Egypt and Syria were at this time cotemporaries in power and dominions, and also they were the very synonym of each other in degradation and crime, in habitudes and in infamous depravity. The Monarchs and Princesses of each Court not only married and intermarried with each other at home, but the Courts courteously exchanged the royal criminality of the same incest with each other, blending a degenerate race with a kindred degeneracy, and by constant repetitions of the same criminality, followed a further decline in all the elements of energy in their pusillanimous progeny, which being continued still further, intensified by incestuous blending of affinities, plunged this country in the same vortex of ruin as that which overwhelmed Syria; and the same retribution for the offended laws of nature which desolated Syria, also crumbled this mighty fabric of power and opulence into ruins. The country of Egypt, which had reared its even yet, lingers the glorious halo of Sesostris and Pharaoh, is known as a monument of that incestuous era which poisoned the very fountains of natural instinct, dethroned every honorable impulse, sapped the stamina of the people, and passed the sceptre to other powers more worthy and able to maintain it.

But you need not travel into those far off scenes of history to find evidences to support the assumption that a violation of the laws against incest is followed by the most grievous afflictions. The blending together consanguineous royalty in the middle ages of Europe seems to have been as fruitful of disastrous consequences, as the same habit was in former times. For a wise and inscrutable purpose, incest was permitted in the first history of man's existence, when alliances of near blood affinities seemed to have a divine sanction, and heaven's benediction rested on them; but at that time population was sparse, the pabulum of life abundant, and great longevity attained; but before the pernicious influences of incest could be established in the fountains of existence, and infused through all the elements of stamina, the multiplicity of the race offered an opportunity for diffusion of the sexual attachments, and thereby averted the otherwise inevitable penalties of degeneracy. In the repetition of the error of consanguineous marriages among the reigning families of the middle ages, to that host of evils already detailed, we have added that of the most loathsome of maladies.

In this later mingling of affiliated blood together we have engendered, in addition to the former afflictions, diseases of various kinds, among which is that of scrofula—a disease so notoriously the result of consanguineous marriages among the royalty of that period, that it acquired the well-merited title of the "King's Evil." What is scrofula but another name for consumption? Owing to a depravity of the digestive apparatus in some constitutions, too much albumen is generated and thrown into the current of blood, which, on account of some exciting cause, is deposited in the meshes of the lungs, producing consumption, or in the glandular structure, producing scrofula. It would be an interesting and a curious investigation to determine whether this original depravity of the great digestive system was or was not brought about by that degeneracy following the marriages of first cousins, whose offspring, still pursuing the ways of their parents, in part, and others forming other alliances beyond the range of family kindred, have contributed to continue and extend these maladies through a succession of ages and generations, until nearly the whole human family have become subject to these reproaches of medical science. There may and does occasionally appear an exception to the general law of physical degeneracy in some families, but even in these there lurks some hidden proclivity to disease in obscurity, owing to which the vital forces seem incapable of resisting ordinary attacks of disease. Also, there are some instances where the mental energy is not impaired, but in such cases most gen-

erally we find a dwarfed person, or a proneness to disease, which foreshadows an early death, long before the attainment of the zenith of man's allotted existence; but in those very families who present these apparent exceptions, and where the anxious solicitude of parents is for a season quieted, the very next offspring may be smitten with all the harrowing infirmities which follow in the train of these unholy marriages. They do not, therefore, amount to exceptions to the general rule laid down, as the diminution of force will surely manifest itself in some portion of their offspring, and those who have escaped the blight of degeneracy, will certainly fall by the sword of innate disease.

In conclusion—you are here, gentlemen, to legislate for the wants and requirements of the people. Ask of every man and woman their honest convictions on this subject and you will not find an advocate for these marriages of double and first cousins, while you will meet with one general outburst in denunciation of them. Not even among the suicidal perpetrators of this custom can you find a defender of its propriety, while the evils growing out from them are so palpably inevitable, that the general voice of the nation implores you to devise some measure to counteract this infatuated feeling among cousins of these degrees.

In a report made to the American Medical Association, in vol. xi. Dr. Bemiss, of Louisville, after collecting the facts of men of observation, during an elaborate investigation, assumes that twelve per cent of all the deaf and dumb in the United States eight per cent of the congenital blind, twelve per cent of the idiots, and ten per cent of the insane are the children of cousins, and concludes that the increase and decrease of calamities correspond with the increase and decrease of relationship—defects of offspring multiplying precisely as we multiply the same blood, and that inand in marrying does incontestably lead, in the aggregate, to their physical and mental depreciation.

Now, Senators, I ask you to interpose your edict of condemnation of such marriages. Forbid them by your legislative authority, and invest public opinion, already arrayed against them, with a potency that can effectually and forever restrain consanguineous marriages. This law will have no retrospective action, nor involve in disgrace the fruit of former errors, by interfering in any manner whatever with those unfortunate connections already consummated. It leaves their offspring to their melancholy fate and resigns them to the inevitable afflictions which bestrew their pathway. Its action is altogether prospective, looking to a more elevated sense of propriety and a more exalted conception of the laws of nature.

Lend your influence and aid in establishing a law to arrest this grievance. For humanity's sake debar these relationships from marrying, by a legal enactment, and your legislative fiat will act as a barrier and lessen a nuisance which is offensive both to the laws of nature and to the laws of man. The human mind naturally aspires only to such objects as are within the range of possible attainment, and not after that which is forbidden and beyond its legitimate reach. And thus it is: without legal restraint many persons will entertain the design of effecting consanguineous alliances, either from motives of policy or the impulse of generous emotions. But place your legal interdiction before the community, as a protecting agis; say these things shall not be, and in many, nay in most instances otherwise favorable to such connections, the idea will be discarded.

With such a seal of disapprobation as you could throw around such marriages, officious parents and sordid relatives would be silenced. Mercenary cousins will not contemplate with any degree of composure, a connection forbidden by the laws of the land, and very soon public opinion, the great regulator, will frown down the practice of such marriages. Incest will be arrested, and the anathemas of a disgusted and more enlightened age will be hushed.