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BY WILLIAM ACTON,

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It is notorious that a large class of women exists in all European capitals, who, gaining easily and spending improvidently large sums in the days of youth and health, sink presently into sickness, and are often left without means of obtaining medical advice. Hitherto these women have not only neglected themselves, but have been shunned and ignored by society. As a consequence, there are few, if any, charitable institutions open to them. Government refuses to acknowledge their existence; and it is only when reduced to the greatest straits that they will apply to the parish for relief, or can summon up resolution to enter the wards of an hospital.

It may readily be believed that many a woman, seeing herself thus cast out from the world without sympathy and without a friend—a very Hagar in the desert—resorts to drinking ardent spirits as her only solace; and, dead to all hope of again re-entering society, wreaks sullen vengeance on it by disseminating contagious diseases.

As I cannot too often recall public attention to the consequences of neglecting this class of females, I will here repeat a few facts I have elsewhere stated,* showing the extent of this contamination. In the army, one man in five, or, more correctly, 181 per 1000, are attacked. In the navy, one in every seven men in the home service suffers from venereal disease; one out of every three merchant sailors admitted into the Dreadnought Hospital, and one out of every two surgical out-patients at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, are similarly affected. Every return of the Registrar-General, as well as the statistics of children's hospitals, shows more and more the frequency of infant deaths from syphilis, and adds to the many reasons for attempting to ameliorate

* A Practical Treatise on Diseases of the Urinary and Generative Organs in both Sexes. By William Acton. Second Edition. pp. 7 *et seq.*

woman's condition. Should any man inconsiderately answer, "What matters it, if this woman is the avenger you describe? Such punishment is well deserved by those who have relations with the outcast:" to him I would rejoin, "If you yourself have escaped, remember that you may have those about you growing up who may some day fall victims; and if no other consideration will move you, let me plead in the name of those near and dear to you, whose interests you jeopardize by your neglect."

There is, however, another error of the day, which cannot be too strongly pointed out. It is a popular delusion that death soon overtakes the daughters of pleasure—that they die young, and that their places are filled up by others who, in their turn, disappear in some apocryphal way. Investigations I have recently made fully warrant me in insisting publicly that this class of women do not die in workhouses or garrets, but, after a time, settle, and become amalgamated with the general population.

Hence, I argue, it becomes the interest of society to take care of their health during their transitory state. The questions then naturally arise, Is it impossible to ameliorate the present state of things? must we continue to bear things as they are? can nothing be done for the wide-spread evil? or are we to sit down, in an age of inquiry and of enlarged charity, watching its daily growth, but neither investigating its cause, nor attempting to devise cures or palliatives?

The man of the world, who oftentimes admits his full belief that the evil is gigantic, still asks, What can be done? He sees the evil, but he has never dreamed of a remedy. The minister of the Gospel deplores the state of the streets and the depravity of his flock, but asks, What is he to do? The Church, he says, even had she the funds, could do nothing but take charge of the Magdalens. In talking over these matters with many amiable persons, lay and clerical, I have been pained by their declining to consider or co-operate with plans which stop short of *reforming* unfortunate women. To this a certain few lend willing ears; but the majority plead real or fictitious ignorance of the class and the misery they produce, or meet me with the threadbare argument, "You encourage vice, and increase the number of its votaries, if you attempt to ameliorate their condition."

But pointing to the streets, I ask of those who thus oppose, for conscience sake, the work, "Are you satisfied with the condition you have let this subject drift into through your 'do nothing, non-interference' principles?" Can you, if you claim that the present state of things is of your doing, walk out of your doors after nightfall, and say that it is well? Or, if you decide that the condition of our women is no business or concern of yours, if you purposely object to learn anything about them, to move for their regulation, to help in their improvement: can you again say

that this is well, or flatter yourselves that you are better than the Pharisee, whom you scorn in your inner chamber, but imitate in your public conduct? If you will persist in this "know-nothing" plan; if you will studiously ignore the existence of vice; if you, like the Levite of old, will pass by on the other side, I say you will have to answer for it.

Failing another monitor—that modern invention, the sanitary reformer, must remind you to be up and doing. This lethargy becomes you not. The pear is ripe for the plucking, and the harvest for the gathering,—the evil is at full flood, too. You must stay the inundation, and save the crop, even though, as did your Saviour, you should chance to fall into company with the harlot and the sinner.

These are big words, I grant; but the time is come when the condition of the Helots who have so long served society to point its morals withal, is forcing itself upon public notice. I, like others, have considered how closely the deplorably low social and sanitary condition of London is connected with the class I refer to; and, after fifteen years' initiation into these mysteries, I admit that I, too, paused and flinched before I broached the subject, fearing to confound the Quixotic with the practical, the charitable with the questionably moral. I have, however, decided to go forwards: and on the eve of publishing a short treatise on "the greatest of our social evils," I wish to appeal to my profession for their invaluable assistance. I would ask of them, and, of all classes in society, they will best appreciate the evil and understand the remedy, and are most likely to be called upon some day to carry out this work, their advice and assistance towards perfecting some scheme of "Prostitute regulation and amelioration," which shall entitle us yet more to the gratitude of our country. I therefore determined, after consulting some professional friends in whom I have confidence, upon circulating the present sheet, with the view of obtaining the verdict of the profession generally, as well as any suggestions bearing upon the subject-matter, with which persons who take an interest in social reform may be pleased to intrust me.

It has, then, been thought desirable, from sanitary considerations, that every female exposing herself to the risk of contracting contagious diseases, should be advised to subscribe,* during her state of health and prosperity, to

* I feel that this inviting women to subscribe is the weak point of the whole system—so much so that I have been over and over again on the point of giving up the notion. It must instinctively be repugnant to every well-regulated mind to be instrumental in collecting money that is the wages of sin—the reward of iniquity. Could I have devised any other plan, willingly would I have done so. If the State, as I believe is its duty, or the public, undertook the foundation and maintenance of special hospitals, these words need not have been written. But as such institutions do not seem forthcoming from either source, I am forced back upon this proposal of co-operation: and have silenced my own doubts by the argument, that the direction of the wages of sin towards the salvation of the sinner, is more than enough to sanctify their handling.

a self-supporting club; so that, when suffering from any affection whatsoever, incidental or not incidental to her vocation, she might, in virtue and right of her own payments, ensure the remuneration of any qualified practitioner she may select, as well as an allowance while under treatment.

It is therefore proposed that—under whatever patronage might be forthcoming—a working Committee, in the first instance by preference, of medical men—knowing, as they best of all men do, the destitution to which disease rapidly reduces crowds of heedless, ignorant, dissipated females, and the danger to others such too often bear about them,—should be invited, on behalf of society at large, and in the interest of the women themselves, first to organize, and then to introduce to the public, the scheme of such an association as I have shadowed forth.

My proposal, in fact, stripped of all wordy superfluities, is to extend for the first time the advantages of Friendly Societies and Benefit Clubs to an order of women, whom I need not further characterize, but whom few will not admit to bear most important relations to society. I believe that, like their betters, they would soon learn and come to acknowledge the advantages of union, and would show the world that their proverbial improvidence mainly arises from their not being initiated into the practice and the value of thrift.

The idea that such an institution would induce one woman more to enter upon sinfulness, will not for a moment bear the light of reason. It holds out no allurement of impunity, and providence was never an inducement to vice. But the plan will, I hope, on the contrary, enable many a poor creature who now is struggling in the waters of sin and misery, to rise once and again to the surface. I may say to the advocates of reformatories and nothing but reformatories, that the primary object of this Club would not be reformation or proselytism: it would be Christian charity towards the fallen, and Christian charity is the handmaid of religion. You must soften the steel before you can mould it; you must get in somehow the thin end of the wedge. A member of such an institution, though she were casehardened as steel, must be something softened by the novel sense of unmercenary sympathy and consideration in the time of her sickness and trouble. But we would have no hand in the conversion of the prodigal. We would leave that to the Church, whose fitting office it is, and be content with rejoicing that we had been her harbingers and her pioneers—that we had opened the way to the heart and conscience, where she stood aghast at the work.

Now, the fact that those who have the closest relations with the class with whom it is proposed to deal, have the directest interest in such an undertaking, would not slightly, I apprehend, enhance the probabilities of its success. The lodging-house keeper, for instance, in whom avarice has swallowed up all other passions, but haply left some glim-

mering sparks of woman's nature which death alone may trample out—who now as creditor for home and food, is less a ministering angel than a vexing demon at the bedside of sickness, must from mere self-interest become our propagandist, and thus retributively the most impure will aid us to uproot, or at the least to lop, the upas tree wherein they harbour. Members of our profession, too, throughout London, whose time is now distracted by attendance nominally or virtually gratuitous, upon increasing numbers of patients whom they know to be proper objects of the public care, must be our natural advocates and our properly paid working staff. Our ideas have no tendency towards centralization, but rather to combating in detail, and by district organization of lay and professional efforts, against the formidable deteriorator of the human race. Fighting for the public health, we may, we earnestly believe, damage in our progress the outworks of immorality and vice, and establish a foothold for the emissary of the cross, where now he wearies heart and eye in seeking one. Once on the march we shall be slow but sure, and if we win but way enough to induce the State to do its office, our object will have been answered. The State has virtually refused to initiate the work of controlling syphilis, and has, in a manner, challenged individuals to the experiment. This challenge we have taken up, and our first step is before the reader.

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