

On voluntary distortions of the human figure by artificial compression.

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John C. Murphy
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ON
VOLUNTARY DISTORTIONS
OF THE
HUMAN FIGURE
BY
ARTIFICIAL COMPRESSION.

From the Phrenological Journal for September 1832.

FOR DUTY DISTORTIONS

OF THE

HUMAN FIGURE

ARTIFICIAL COMPRESSION

From the *Journal of the American Medical Association*,
Chicago, Ill., September 1, 1911.

VOLUNTARY DISTORTIONS, &c.

WE have frequently remarked that one grand distinction between the lower animals and man consists in this,—that the Creator prescribes the food, clothing, occupations, and mode of life which are best suited to the nature of each animal, without consciousness, on its part, of the wisdom of the arrangements of which it is the object; whereas man is left to employ his observing and reflecting faculties in studying his own and external nature, and in adapting his conduct to both. The lower animals never attempt to build habitations inconsistent with, or injurious to, their health and enjoyment: Men, in a state of ignorance, frequently commit the most hurtful errors in constructing their dwellings. The lower animals are never injured by the clothing which nature provides for them; while man frequently produces great suffering to himself and his offspring, by injudicious exercise of his talents in this department. But the most injurious and fantastic displays of human error proceeding from ignorance are seen in the modifications of the form of the body itself, attempted by different nations, with the view of enhancing their comeliness and beauty.

CARIB.

The Carib admires a very low and retreating forehead, and by the application of sand-bags in infancy, he increases the deficiency of the reflecting organs, which, in that people, appears to be naturally very conspicuous. He produces, as the *ne plus ultra* of beauty, the annexed form.



To an enlightened man, this appears an extravagant and hurtful perversion of taste, and unspeakably injurious in its moral consequences. These people, and indeed many of the American tribes, sedulously labour to extinguish in themselves the noblest attributes of humanity, the powers of reflection and benevolence, by preventing the growth of the organs of those faculties.

The Chinese have directed their attention to the opposite extremity of the human figure, and aspired to improve upon the wisdom of the Creator, by diminishing, by artificial compression, the feet of their females.

European ladies perceive the absurdity and want of enlightened taste which characterise these attempts; but they have entertained the project of improving the form of the body by compressing the waist, a proceeding literally analogous to those of the Caribs and Chinese, on the head and feet. The fundamental principle, that human beings require to study their own constitution before being

able to turn it to the best account, has not been recognised by any nation in the world; and our fair countrywomen in particular proceed as ignorantly and recklessly in compressing their figures, as the veriest savages who deform their nature by artificial operations, whether of compression, boring, or tatooing.

On 20th May 1829, the *Scotsman* published an admirable Essay "On the Compression of the Waist in Females, by the Use of Corsets." It is so replete with sound philosophy and practical wisdom, that we have solicited and obtained the permission of the enlightened and philanthropic Editor of that Journal to re-publish it. We present it entire, and have added figures of the osseous trunk of the body, and of the contents of the thorax and abdomen, to give greater effect to his observations.

We have been favoured, says the *Scotsman*, with the perusal of an interesting essay on this subject by a medical gentleman, which has more fully opened our eyes to the mischiefs resulting from the compressed waists now in fashion—mischiefs which, in the paper before us, are exposed with a clearness and weight of evidence, that must carry conviction to the mind of the most incredulous. The paper is so ably written and conclusive, that we should have been happy to print it entire, had its scientific form not rendered it too learned for the readers of newspapers. In the abstract of its contents which we shall submit, the author's statements must lose something of the precision and force which the introduction of anatomical details, with a frequent reference to plates, enable him to bestow upon them; but we think we shall be able, in a general way, to shew young ladies what injury to health their compliance with the present unnatural fashion, if persevered in, is certain to entail upon them.

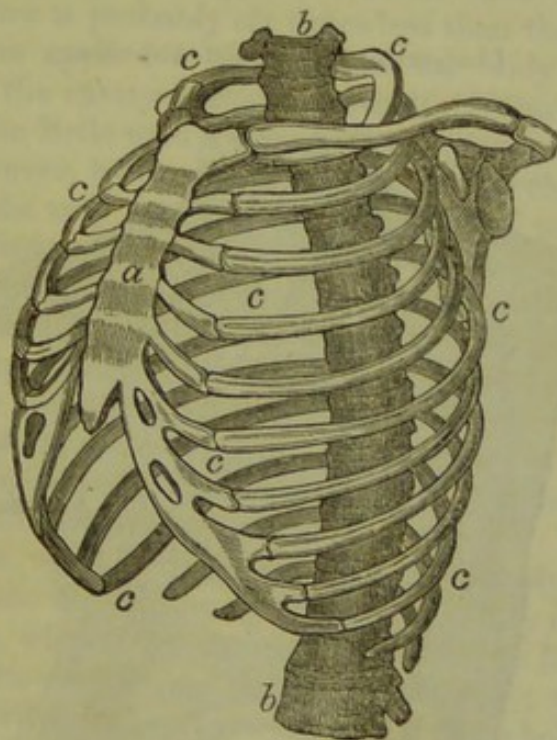
Fashion lives on novelty, and we have on this account much charity for its wanderings and eccentricities. Bonnets with a snout as long as an elephant's proboscis, or a margin as broad as a Winchester bushel, are merely ridiculous. Shoulders that look like wings, and sleeves as wide as a petticoat, we think are not particularly graceful; but they have at least the merit of being airy, and we take no offence. We cannot, however, extend our indulgence to the compressed waist which is the rage at present. We know that as often as the waist is lengthened to its natural limits, this tendency to abridge its diameter appears; and we confess we are puzzled to account for the fact, for surely it is strange, that a permanent prepossession should exist in favour of a mode of dress, which is at once ugly, unnatural, and pernicious. Were fashion under the guidance of taste, the principles of drapery in painting and sculpture would never be lost sight of in its changes. The clothes that cover us may be disposed in an infinite variety of forms, without violating those rules which the artist is careful to observe. The true form of the body ought to be disclosed to the eye, without the shape being exhibited in all its minutiae as in the dress of a harlequin; but in no case should the natural proportions (supposing the figure to be good) be changed. Ask the sculptor what he thinks of a fashionable waist, pinched till

it rivals the lady's neck in tenuity; and he will tell you it is monstrous. Consult the physician, and you will learn that this is one of those follies in which no female can long indulge with impunity; for health and even life are often sacrificed to it.

We ought to mention, that the writer of the paper before us, has taken for ground-work an "Essay on the Use of Corsets," by the celebrated German physiologist Soemmering, but with the statements of that author he has combined many valuable remarks of his own.

Corsets are used partly as a warm covering to the chest, and partly to furnish a convenient attachment to other parts of the female dress. This is all proper and correct; but to these uses fashion superadds others, originating in fantastical notions of beauty. Corsets are employed to modify the shape, to render the chest as small below, and as broad above, as possible, and to increase the elevation, fulness, and prominence of the bosom. To shew how this affects the condition of the body, we must begin by giving a short description of the thorax or chest, which is the subject of this artificial compression.

Every one who has seen a skeleton, knows that the chest consists of a cavity protected by a curious frame-work of bones.—

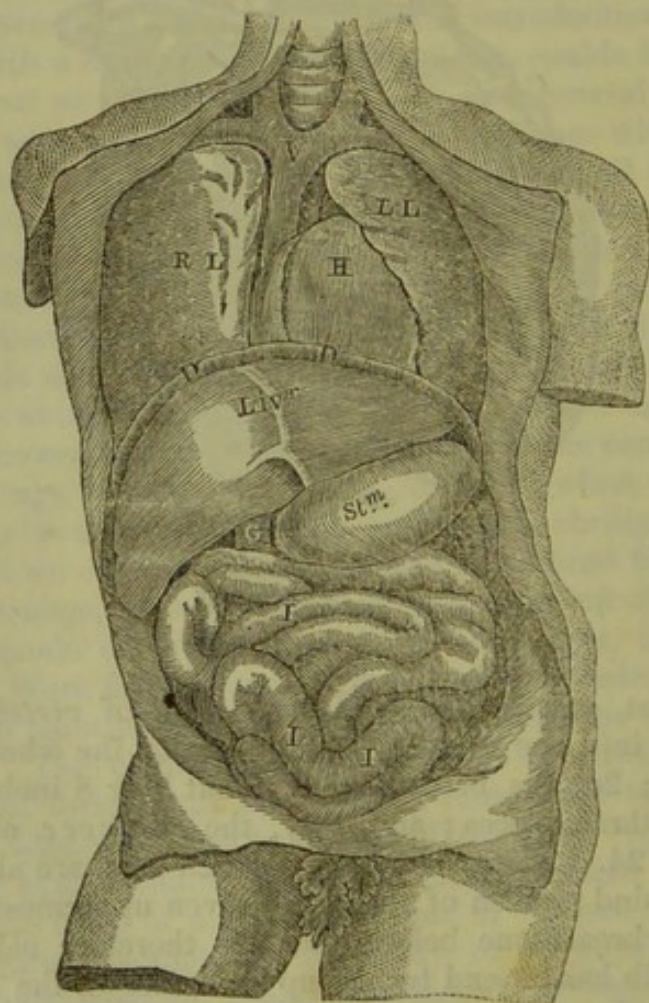


These are, 1st, the backbone *bb* (consisting of *vertebræ*, or short bones jointed into one another) which sustains the whole upper part of the trunk; 2d, the breastbone *a*, about 7 or 8 inches long, and composed of three pieces; and 3dly, the ribs *cccc*, of which there are generally 24. The twelve ribs on each side, are all fixed to the backbone behind; seven of these, the seven uppermost, are also attached to the breastbone before, and are therefore called *true ribs*. The eighth rib has its end turned up and rests on the seventh; the ninth rests in the same way on the eighth; but the tenth, eleventh,

and twelfth, are not connected with one another in front at all. The fore extremity of each rib consists not of bone, but of an elastic substance called cartilage. The elasticity of this substance, combined with the oblique position of the ribs, constitutes a beautiful provision, in consequence of which the chest enlarges and contracts its volume to afford free play to the lungs.

We now wish to call attention to the form of this cavity, which, as we have seen, is surrounded and protected by the backbone, ribs, and breastbone, and is called the *thorax* or chest. The uppermost pair of ribs, which lie just at the bottom of the neck, are very short; the next pair are rather longer; the third longer still; and thus they go on increasing in length to the seventh pair, or last *true* ribs, after which the length diminishes, but without materially contracting the size of the cavity, because the false ribs only go round a part of the body. Hence the chest has a sort of conical shape, or it may be compared to the bee-hives used in this country, the narrow or pointed end being next the neck, and the broad end undermost. The natural form of the thorax, in short, is just the reverse of the fashionable shape of the waist. The latter is narrow below, and wide above; the former is narrow above, and wide below.

Contents of Thorax and Abdomen.



The *contents* of the thorax are, First, the Heart H, which is the centre of the circulating system, and which, for the sake of its metaphorical offices, every lady must be anxious to keep from injury: Next, the Lungs, R L and L L (right lung and left lung), which occupy by far the largest space, and of the delicacy of whose operations every one may judge. There are, besides, either within the thorax or in juxta-position with it, the Stomach, *Stm.*; Liver, *Livr.*; Gall-bladder G, and Kidneys, with the œsophagus, the trachea or wind-pipe, part of the Intestines I I I, and many nerves—all intimately connected with the vital powers. Most of these organs are not only of primary importance in themselves, but, through the nerves, arteries, &c. their influence extends to the head and the remotest parts of the limbs, so that when they are injured, *health is poisoned at its source*, and the mischief always travels to other parts of the system.

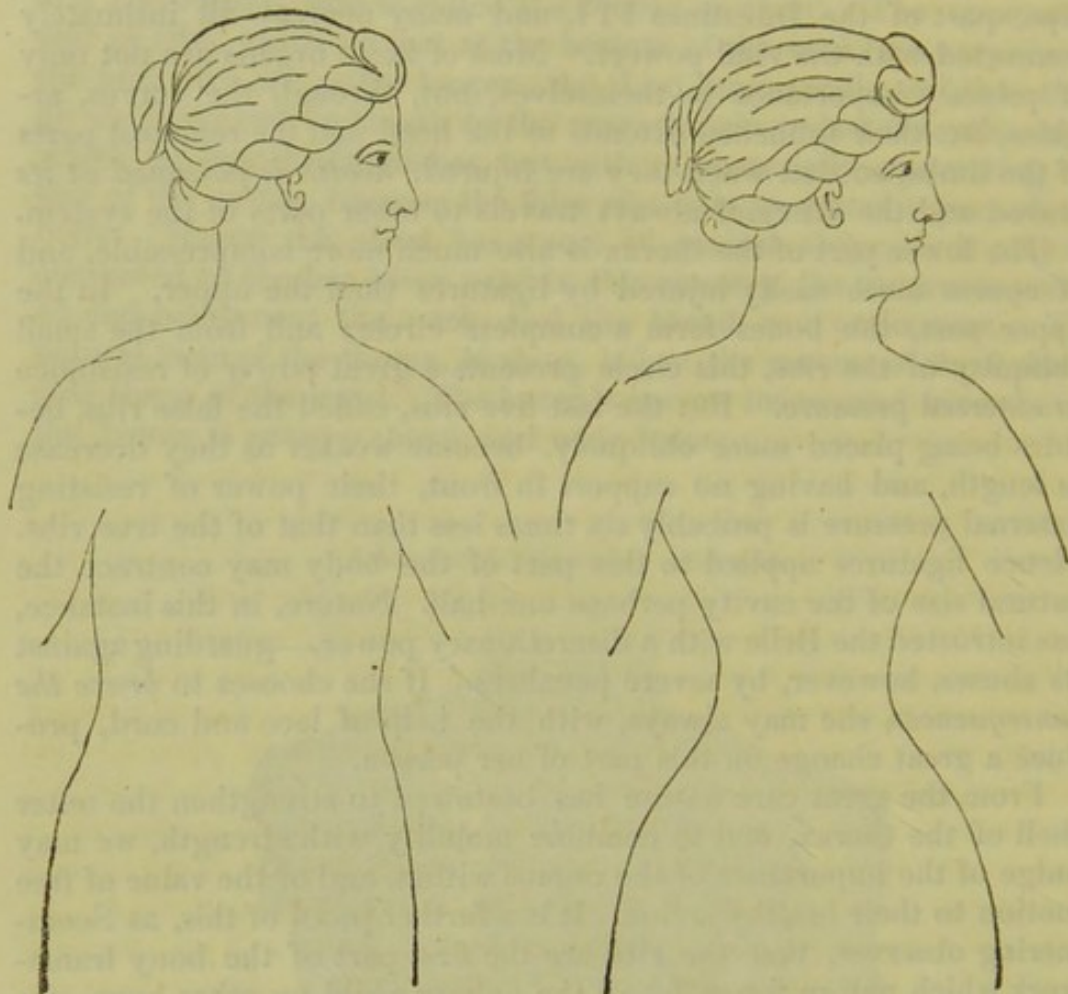
The lower part of the thorax is also much more compressible, and of course more easily injured by ligatures than the upper. In the upper part, the bones form a complete circle; and from the small obliquity of the ribs, this circle presents a great power of resistance to external pressure. But the last five ribs, called the false ribs, besides being placed more obliquely, become weaker as they decrease in length, and having no support in front, their power of resisting external pressure is probably six times less than that of the true ribs. Hence ligatures applied to this part of the body may contract the natural size of the cavity perhaps one-half. Nature, in this instance, has intrusted the Belle with a discretionary power,—guarding against its abuses, however, by severe penalties. If she chooses to *brave the consequences*, she may always, with the help of lace and cord, produce a great change on this part of her person.

From the great care nature has bestowed to strengthen the outer shell of the thorax, and to combine mobility with strength, we may judge of the importance of the organs within, and of the value of free motion to their healthy action. It is a further proof of this, as Soemmering observes, that the ribs are the first part of the bony framework which nature forms, for in the unborn child no other bones except those of the ear are so perfect.

Imagine, now, what is the consequence of applying compression, by corsets of some unyielding material, to a cavity enclosing so many delicate organs, whose free action is essential to health. First, the lowest part of the shell of the thorax yields most; the false ribs, and the lower true ribs, are pressed inwards; the whole viscera in this part of the body, including part of the intestines, are squeezed close together and forced upwards; and as the pressure is continued above, they are forced higher still. If the lacing is carried further, the breast-bone is raised, and sometimes bent; the collar-bone protrudes its inner extremity; and the shoulder-blades are forced backwards. The under part of the lungs is pressed together, and the entrance of the blood into it hindered; the abdominal viscera, being least protected, suffer severely; the stomach is compressed, its distention prevented, and its situation and form changed, giving rise to imperfect digestion; the blood is forced up to the head, where it generates various com-

plaints ; the liver has its shape altered and its functions obstructed ; the bones having their natural motions constrained, distortion ensues and the high shoulder, the twisted spine or breast-bone, begins at last to manifest itself through the integuments and the clothes.

It is needless to enlarge on these details, as we shall give a list of the diseases generated by tight corsets by and by. A mere inspection of the following figures will shew the unnatural change produced on the body by hard lacing.



The figure on the left exhibits the waist of the Medicean Venus, which is considered as the type of the female form in its finest symmetry ; on the right you have the same form squeezed into fashionable proportions by the steam-power of modern corsets. This figure is copied as literally as possible from the engraving which accompanies the Essay, and whatever some persons little conversant with the secrets of the toilet may think, we believe it is not exaggerated. A single glance at these figures will shew better than many pages of argument, what havock tight-lacing must produce in the delicate and complicated mechanism lodged within the chest.

“ Another effect of tight corsets,” says the Essayist, “ is, that those who have been long so closely laced, become at last unable to hold themselves erect, or move with comfort without them, but, as is very justly said, *fall together*, in consequence of the natural form and position of the ribs being altered. The muscles of the back are weakened and crippled, and cannot maintain themselves in their natural

position for any length of time. The spine, too, no longer accustomed to bear the destined weight of the body, bends and sinks down. Where tight-lacing is practised, young women from 15 to 20 years of age are found so dependent upon their corsets that they faint whenever they lay them aside, and therefore are obliged to have themselves laced before going to sleep. For as soon as the thorax and abdomen are relaxed, by being deprived of their usual support, the blood rushing downwards, in consequence of the diminished resistance to its motion, empties the vessels of the head, and thus occasions fainting."

"From 1760 to about 1770," says Soemmering, "it was the fashion in Berlin and other parts of Germany, and also in Holland a few years ago, to apply corsets to children. This practice fell into disuse, in consequence of its being observed, that children who did not wear corsets grew up straight, while those who were treated with this extraordinary care, got by it a high shoulder or a hunch. Many families might be named, in which parental fondness selected the handsomest of several boys to be put in corsets, and the result was, that these alone were hunched. The deformity was attributed at first to the improper mode of applying the corsets, till it was discovered that no child thus invested, grew up straight, not to mention the risk of consumption and rupture which were likewise incurred by using them. I, for my part, affirm, that I do not know any woman who, by tight-lacing (that is, by artificial means), has obtained 'a fine figure,' in whom I could not, by accurate examination, point out either a high shoulder, oblique compressed ribs, a lateral incurvation of the spine, in the form of an Italic *s*, or some other distortion. I have had opportunities of verifying this opinion among ladies of high condition, who, as models of fine form, were brought forward for the purpose of putting me to silence."

Young ladies in course of time hope to become wives, and wives to become mothers. Even in this last stage, few females have the courage to resist a practice which is in general use, though to them it is trebly injurious. But it is sufficient to glance at this branch of the subject, on which, for obvious reasons, we cannot follow our Medical Instructor. It is lamentable, however, that mothers who have themselves experienced the bitter fruits of tight-lacing, still permit their daughters to indulge in it. There is, in truth, no tyranny like the tyranny of fashion. "I have found mothers of discernment and experience," says Soemmering, "who predicted that, in their 25th year, a hunch would inevitably be the lot of their daughters, whom they nevertheless allowed to wear corsets, because they were afraid to make their children singular."

But it is time to speak of the diseases produced by the passion for *slender waists*. "One is astonished," says Soemmering, "at the number of diseases which corsets occasion. Those I have subjoined rest on the authority of the most eminent physicians. Tight-lacing produces—

"*In the Head* ; headach, giddiness, tendency to fainting, pain in the eyes, pain and ringing in the ears, and bleeding at the nose.

"*In the Thorax* ; besides the displacement of the bones, and the injury done to the breast, tight-lacing produces shortness of breath, spitting of blood, consumption, derangement of the circulation, palpitation of the heart, and water in the chest.

"*In the Abdomen* ; loss of appetite, squeamishness, eructations, vomiting of blood, depraved digestion, flatulence, diarrhœa, colic pains, induration of the liver, dropsy, and rupture. It is also followed by melancholy, hysteria, and many diseases peculiar to the female constitution, which it is not necessary to enumerate in detail."

But the injury falls not merely on the inward structure of the body, but also on its outward beauty, and on the temper and feelings with which that beauty is associated. Beauty is in reality but another name for that expression of countenance which is the index of sound health, intelligence, good feelings, and peace of mind. All are aware that uneasy feelings existing habitually in the breast, speedily exhibit their signature on the countenance, and that bitter thoughts, or a bad temper, spoil the human face divine of its grace. But it is not so generally known that irksome or painful sensations, though merely of a physical nature, by a law equally certain, rob the temper of its sweetness, and as a consequence, the countenance of the more ethereal and better part of its beauty. Pope attributes the rudeness of a person usually bland and polished, to the circumstance, that "he had not dined;" in other words, his stomach was in bad order. But there are many other physical pains besides hunger that sour the temper ; and, for our part, if we found ourselves sitting at dinner with a man whose body was girt on all sides by board and bone, like the north pole by thick-ribbed ice, we should no more expect to find grace, politeness, amenity, vivacity, and good-humour, in such a companion, than in Prometheus with a vulture battenning on his vitals, or in Cerberus, whose task is to growl all day long in chains.

It may not be amiss to inform the ladies, that, according to our medical instructor, the red-pointed nose which glows, rather inauspiciously, on some female faces, is in many cases the consequence of tight-lacing.

A few days ago, another medical friend told us that he was present when the body of an elderly lady was opened, who had in her day been fashionable, and whose liver bore testimony to the fact, for it had an indentation deep enough to hold a large finger, exactly where the belt or girdle was worn in her younger days. We need scarcely add, that she died of inveterate stomach complaints, and that she was past life's meridian, but not old. In one respect, ladies who lace tightly may be said to provide against the decay of their beauty, since they take the best security against reaching *old age*, which, as every one knows, rifles woman of her outward charms.

In time past, we were ignorant enough to admire, like our neighbours, slender waists ; but thanks to our medical friend, we are cured of this folly. We were wont to think that the Loves and the Graces played round such delicate forms ; but in future we shall never see them without thinking of twisted bones, dropsy, consumption, indu-

rated livers, fainting, spitting of blood, melancholy, hysteria, sour tempers, rickety children, pills, lotions, and doctors' bills.

As for our brethren of the male sex who are still in the bonds of error on this subject, we would refer them to the two figures prefixed, and ask them to "look on this picture and on that," and say whether, in encouraging females to ruin their health by bestowing their admiration on such forms as the one on the right, they are not patronizing what is an outrage on taste and a libel on the most perfect of Nature's works. Were a woman sculptured according to the proportions now fashionable, every one possessing common sense would pronounce the figure *monstrous*. The subject deeply concerns fathers and mothers, and indeed persons of all ages and stations. Fashion lords it over the lady of quality, but the milkmaid is not beyond its influence. At this day when medical knowledge is so much diffused, surely ignorance, caprice, or chance, should not be permitted to injure health and ruin constitutions, under the pretext of regulating our dress.

Thus far the *Scotsman*. It is impossible to add to the force of the reasoning here employed, and we simply ask, whether it is possible to view with gratification a practice by which the heart, stomach, lungs and liver, are compressed, distorted, and impeded in their functions? Let the reader look at the first lady with a compressed waist whom he shall see on the street, and reflect on the deep injury which her dress is inflicting on the fountains of health and vigour, and on the suffering which she is preparing for herself and eventually for her offspring; and in particular, let him observe her stiff and constrained motion, occasioned by the compression of the muscles and nerves of the back, and try to discover a line of beauty in her contour. We venture to predict that his perceptions of beauty will undergo an entire revolution as soon as his understanding is enlightened, and that no deformity in the female person will appear more painful and striking than a slender waist:—

Heaven! that the human mind,
Warped by imagination, should believe,
Or e'en suggest it possible, the form,
Whose archetype the Deity himself
Created in His Image, could be changed
From its divine proportion, and receive
From alteration, comeliness and grace!
That round the zone which awkwardly reduced
E'en to an insect ligament the waist,
The blooming loves should sport, enticing charms,
And young attractions.

Infancy, a Poem, by Downman.

