

Address upon illegitimacy to the working men of Scotland / by John M. Strachan.

Contributors

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ADDRESS UPON ILLEGITIMACY

TO THE

WORKING MEN OF SCOTLAND,

BY

JOHN M. STRACHAN, M.D. *

DOLLAR.

EPHES. v. 11.—“Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.”

EPHES. v. 5.—“No unclean person . . . hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.”

1 THESS. iv. 7, 8.—“God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man but God.”

ALLOW me to begin this Address by saying a few words regarding myself, in explanation of my motives and objects. For thirty years I have been engaged in the practice of my profession, during which I have been necessarily brought into contact with all classes. I have had among my patients a few of the gentry, a considerable number of the middle or what may be called the genteel class, and a great many of the working community. I have thus acquired an intimate knowledge of the good qualities, as well as of the faults, of the different grades of society—more intimate, perhaps, and more extensive than could have been obtained by any but a medical man. In consequence of this knowledge of the good as well as the bad qualities of all classes, I have for many years been getting a stronger and stronger conviction of the absurdity of the different estimation in which various employments are held, some being looked up to as superior, while others are looked down upon. It is surprising how equally diffused are the highest and best qualities of man. Religion, intellect, talent, belong to no particular class, although, perhaps, the wealthy may have better opportunities of cultivating them; but even this is not necessarily so.

I have more especially felt growing up in me a strong regard for what is called the working class, and a conviction of its importance to the community—along with this a deep sense of the dignity of labour. I find it impossible to conceive of any reason why the labour of the hands should be less respected than that of the brain. It is true that, in this country, it is at present less highly paid, but this is merely accidental. In Australia, for instance, manual labour is more highly paid than brain work, and there the working man is the gentleman, looking down on those who can work only with their heads. But even in this country, I question if it be altogether true that labour with the hands is less highly remunerated than what are called genteel employments. Many shopmen, clerks, schoolmasters, and many belonging to the professions, would be very glad if they could steadily command the wages of skilled workmen. Certain it is that, as brain workers are becoming more abundant, their remuneration and the

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estimation in which they are held are growing less; and, as working men are raising themselves in intelligence, their social importance, as well as their wages, are steadily increasing.

Such being my opinions, I have, as I said before, a deep regard for working men. And as I suppose we all have implanted within us a desire to do some good in our day and generation, I should indeed feel deeply gratified if I could be, in any way, instrumental in removing what appears to me to be the greatest stain on this class, when compared with the rest of the community.

This has been rather a long-winded introduction, but I thought it necessary as an explanation of my motives in taking up the subject that I have now to bring before you. You are aware that, about four years ago, a new and very correct system of registration of births, deaths, and marriages was introduced into this country, and that every quarter the Registrar-General publishes abstracts of these. About a year ago, in the report for the quarter ending in March, 1858, the public were startled by having their attention directed to the number of illegitimate births that took place in Scotland. Before that time we had been priding ourselves on our fancied superiority to other countries in religion and morality, but our self-complacency was sadly disturbed when it was clearly shown, by incontestible evidence, that, in regard to a want of chastity in our females, we are far behind many countries that we had been in the habit of looking down upon.

In the Report alluded to, it is stated that in Scotland 9 per cent of the births are illegitimate; in England, Sweden, Norway, and Belgium 6 per cent; in France and Prussia 7 per cent; in Denmark and Hanover 9 per cent; and in Austria 11 per cent. After a careful consideration of the records of my own practice for many years, and of the registers of this and the neighbour parishes, I am convinced that, of the first children amongst the working class not less than ninety out of every hundred are either illegitimate or are saved from this reproach only by the marriage of the parents within a short period of the birth of the child; or to put this in other words, that nine out of every ten young women of this class are unchaste. But as even amongst married women one out of every ten have no children, we are almost forced to the conclusion that amongst women of the working class few or none preserve their chastity till their marriage. This is a dreadful statement, and yet I fear it is strictly true.

But now, my friends, I come to the great fact that I wish to bring under your notice. It is a painful one, but nevertheless it is a fact, and we ought with manliness to look it boldly in the face, and it is for that purpose I now address you. All this immorality is entirely confined to the working class. Yes, my friends, I know you will be startled, but it is true, and I am surprised that this truth has not hitherto been brought more prominently forward. Remember I am speaking only of the females. Amongst the men there is probably more immorality of this kind in the upper than in the lower classes. But a want of chastity in females is entirely confined to the working class.

During the thirty years that I have been in practice, I cannot recollect of a single instance of an illegitimate child whose mother belonged to the class of gentry, or even to the middle class. From this statement I must

except farmers, as I am sorry to say that, in this matter, they must be ranked with the working class. But, with this exception, I never knew an illegitimate child whose mother was not the daughter of a working man, and I cannot recollect of a single instance, except in the working class, where a child was born within five or six months after wedlock. Some may be inclined to explain this by saying that the wealthier class have better opportunities of concealing the crime by going from home to be confined. But I am convinced that this is not the explanation. Intimate as I necessarily am with my patients, such a thing could scarcely happen without my being cognisant of it, or, at least, suspecting it. I do not mean to say that it never does occur. The late painful and notorious case of Madeleine Smith shows that immorality is to be found in all classes; still, except in the working class, it is very rare indeed.

Take an example from the locality with which I am best acquainted. I have looked over the registers of Dollar from the commencement of the new system, and I find that, in three years, there have been nineteen illegitimate births, in every one of them the mothers were working men's daughters. During the same period there were ten marriages of persons who continue to reside in Dollar. In five of these a child was born within five or six months of the marriage. All of these five were working men.

Now, my friends, I do not bring forward this fact merely as a piece of speculation, or for the purpose of irritating or of humbling us, but for the purpose of asking if this stigma must continue. Is there any reason why working men should continue to suffer the domestic misery, that, in every case, results from the fall of their daughters from virtue? If the other classes of the community are comparatively exempt from this misery, is it absolutely necessary that one class should continue to bear it? In all classes the human passions are the same, and in all, human weakness is the same. Why is it then, that the fall from virtue should so peculiarly belong to one class of society? I cannot doubt but that every one of you must be as deeply interested in this subject as I am. No father of a family can consider with indifference this dreadful evil, which may some day convert his purest pleasure and greatest pride into his greatest misery and deepest humiliation. No young man can think on it lightly. Looking forward to marriage, it must be his desire that his wife should be pure and chaste, worthy of his respect, and fit to train his children.

But let us not be content with talking over and bewailing this evil. Can nothing be done to remedy it? A question that always forces itself on the consideration of a physician is, whether the disease he is called upon to treat be curable or not? If he thinks it is, he sets himself earnestly to the work. Is, then, this evil that we have been considering capable of cure. I unhesitatingly answer, Yes. I do not mean that any efforts of ours will put an end to sin, but it is in your power, by the blessing of God, if you will only give yourselves to the work with earnestness of purpose, to render this sin as rare among yourselves as it is among the middle or upper classes. I will not believe that there is anything in honest labour, I will not believe that there is anything in poverty, which necessarily entails impurity on our females. And I would call upon you, from the respect in which you ought to hold the class to which you belong, to rise up and rescue it from this reproach.

Allow me again to refer to the practice of a physician. When called to a patient, having ascertained the nature of the disease, he next inquires into its cause or causes; and these, being discovered, often point clearly to the plan of treatment. There are many diseases, too, that, where you have discovered and removed their cause, will cure themselves. In the hope that we may be thus led to some remedy for this moral disease, let us endeavour to discover the causes which produce it. These are probably very numerous, and to each of your minds may be suggested some that have not occurred to mine. I beg, however, to mention those that appear to me to be of importance.

The existence of this crime so exclusively in one class of society would lead to the conclusion that, in regard to this matter, their tone of feeling, manners, and conduct differs from that of the other classes, and on examination we shall find that it is so.

The first cause which I beg to bring under your notice, as tending to produce this low state of morality, is the limited accommodation in the houses of working men, by which young people of different sexes are crowded together. It is very common for grown up people of both sexes to sleep in the same room; and even when this is not the case, their washing and dressing operations are performed in each other's presence, in a way that is never done in the other classes, and which must have a great influence in destroying that purity and shrinking delicacy of the female mind which is the best protection to virtue. Of course, I do not mean that this crowding leads directly to sin, but merely that it destroys the delicacy and purity of the mind. In regard to the removal of this cause, I do not think that the difficulty is so great as it appears to be at first sight. It is only applicable to those families who have sons and daughters at home beyond the age of childhood, and with them it is merely a matter of twenty shillings a-year of more rent. I am sure that reflection will convince you that the benefits are worth the money. Many working men's houses are cottages consisting of a but and ben. A very little expense would put up a wooden stair, and fit up two little sleeping apartments in the attics. If such houses were in demand, there would soon be a supply.

The second cause that I would point out is the coarseness and indelicacy of language that is often permitted even in the family circle. This is a painful subject, because it is a serious reflection on the parents, but yet I must speak my mind. There often is with parents themselves, and in presence of their children, a coarseness and indelicacy of conversation that is never heard amongst the middle or upper classes.

In regard to the removal of this cause, it is, of course, entirely under the control of the parents, and only requires them to be thoroughly convinced of the evil. This however, may be more difficult to do than even to build garret rooms. But let us not be discouraged by difficulties. No great reforms were ever effected in a day, or without great and long continued efforts, and let us remember that every one must do his own share in the work. If, for example, every one that reads this address would resolve that his own speech and conduct should henceforth be more pure and circumspect, the result in years to come would be far greater than, without reflection, we might be inclined to believe.

A third cause is the low moral tone of feeling which prevails among

young working men in regard to female delicacy and chastity. I do not know if I can easily make you understand what I mean; but I think there is a great difference in this respect between the two classes of society. When I was a student, although there was plenty of wildness and evil amongst us, yet we had very high notions regarding the necessity of purity in our sweethearts and wives. It was a sentiment often uttered amongst my fellow students, that they would on no account marry a woman that had lost her chastity either to themselves or any one else. And I believe that, with nearly every young man of the middle and upper classes, this sentiment is acted upon,—that is to say, that he would not marry a woman whom he knew to have fallen, even although he himself had been the tempter. I do not stop to enquire whether this be right or wrong; but I am certain that, if this sentiment were as uniformly acted upon amongst young working men, as it is amongst the other classes, it would soon, to a very great degree, check the evil.

The same tone of feeling which leads young men of the middle class to be so particular about the chastity of their wives, makes them also very chary about the delicacy and purity of their sweethearts. The respect, and even reverence, for the sex which love produces when grafted on this tone of feeling, makes them unable to bear the least appearance of coarseness or indelicacy in the object of their worship. If such were the tone of young working men, there can be no doubt but that there would speedily be an improvement of our young women. This leads me to allude to the language and conduct which prevail amongst our young men and women. I am well acquainted with the manners of both classes, and I assure you that in this respect, there is a very great contrast. Coarse language and indelicate freedoms are common in the one class which, in the other, would lead to a sound thrashing from the father or brother of the lady, and would be considered a gross insult by the lady herself.

This lowness of tone in regard to female purity is in some measure caused by the indelicacy of speech and conduct permitted among the young, to which I have already alluded, and to a great degree, by a want of cultivation of the mind. If, therefore, parents would carefully repress every approach to indelicacy among their children, and if young people would spend more of their leisure time in profitable reading, and use other means likely to cultivate and improve their minds, there would soon be a change for the better in this respect.

I shall now only allude to one other cause which has, however, more influence than any I have mentioned. I allude to the manner of courtship that is customary among the working classes.

In the upper and middle ranks seldom is there any such thing as secret courtship allowed, either by the parents of the lady or by the lady herself, until there has been a regular declaration of love, and what is called an engagement. Before that the young man visits in the family as an acquaintance, but, when he has declared himself, then, perhaps, he has opportunities to meet the lady alone, but even then not with the secrecy, late hours, and I must say it, indelicacy, that is common among the working-class.

I need not tell you how differently courtship is conducted among working people. If a young woman have no acknowledged lover, she receives the visits probably of many young men who may be courting her, as it is called,

she does not know whether with serious intentions or not, and it is as likely as not that they have no serious intentions in the matter. She receives them in secrecy, at late hours, very probably getting out of bed for the purpose. She spends hours with them alone, and in the dark; she allows of freedoms that, she herself believes, should only be given to an accepted lover. But you will remember that, with all this, there may be no love, or only on one side. If there be love on both sides, you will understand me when I say that the danger is less. The elevation of mind that true love produces is itself a protection. But there may be love only on one side, or on neither. You are well aware that all that I have spoken of—the secrecy—the late hours—the darkness—the freedoms—are all allowed when there may be little or no love on either side. Can you wonder that, in such circumstances, the human passions are aroused, and that they go on from one freedom to another, perhaps neither intending anything wrong at first, but both gradually yielding to temptation, till a world of misery to themselves and others is produced for years and years to come.

I do not mean to say that, with such a method of courtship, unchastity is sure to follow. I am well aware that many pure and virtuous girls have been courted in this way. But I do say that the danger is too great. Our weak human nature requires protection and safe-guards, and not such sources of excitement to evil as all this.

Now, nothing like this occurs among the upper classes. In their courtship there is much to encourage love and respect for each other, but nothing, absolutely nothing to excite to lust.

It appears a hopeless task to change anything so universal and so thoroughly ingrafted in the manner of the country as this method of courtship. But we have nothing to do with its universality, let us look to ourselves. Let us well consider whether the manner of courtship, which is usual only among the working class, be right or wrong. If wrong, let us do our part to put it down, and leave the rest to God. We may, I think, indulge the hope that, the attention of the whole country being at present directed to this subject, by the Registrar's reports, may lead to efforts to remedy the evil.

Parents may do much to introduce a better state of things, but let me warn them that this is not to be done by increased strictness or harshness. Kind and frank advice to sons and daughters, showing the evils of the present system, may do good, but let this be accompanied by every encouragement and every indulgence being given for intercourse between young men and women at proper times and places. If more liberty were given for acquaintances and sweethearts to meet in the family circle, and in social intercourse, there would be less need for stolen interviews.

Domestic servants are a class of persons who, I think, peculiarly demand our sympathy in such matters. Living in families, constantly beholding the pleasures of family and social intercourse, they are yet entirely debarred from the enjoyment of them. They can have no social intercourse with the families of their employers, for they must be kept at a distance, and in their places. Other work-people have their leisure hours, when they may have their bit of gossip and their innocent flirtations; but they have no leisure hours, or even if they have, they can have none of the society of their equals, for a servant maid must have "no followers." If her mistress

be unusually indulgent, she may be allowed to have "one respectable young man" to visit her. And what is to become of those poor girls who have no "respectable young man?" With no acquaintances allowed, it is not easy to see how they are to get one. Now, I do not mean to say that servant maids ever do lead this hermit life. Of course they don't, but the evil is, that to gratify that innocent desire for intercourse with their equals which God has implanted within them, they are driven to receive their visitors clandestinely and at untimely hours.

I have now just a few words to say to young men.

I shall not suppose that there is any one of you to whom I require to say a word against the crime of deliberate seduction. I shall merely repeat the following stanza from the "Cottar's Saturday Night," chiefly on account of its beauty:—

"Is there in human form that bears a heart,
A wretch! a villain! lost to love and truth
That can, with studied, sly, ensnaring art
Betray sweet Jenny's unsuspecting youth?
Curse on his perjur'd arts, dissembling, smooth;
Are honour, virtue, conscience, all exiled;
Is there no pity, no relenting ruth,
Points to the parents fondling o'er their child;
Then paints the ruin'd maid, and their distraction wild."

But deliberate seduction is not what we have to guard against. In ninety-nine cases out of the hundred there has, I believe, been no previous criminal intention on either side, but the temptation to which they thoughtlessly exposed themselves has been too great for their virtue, weakened as it has been by previous indelicacy of thought and conduct. You, my young friends, may not unlikely be exposed to such temptation. May I beg of you seriously to think of the dreadful evils which flow from yielding to it. Should you afterwards marry the girl, this sin will probably be an injury to you both for life, by lessening your respect for each other, and may not unlikely be a source of bitter crimination in many an angry moment. If you do not marry, then, think on the load of misery and injury to the poor girl. To you the consequences of the crime may be comparatively trifling, in so far as your success in the world is concerned, but to her they are dreadfully severe. The anger of her parents—the scorn of her friends and relatives—the burden of the child, probably destroying all prospect of marriage. Think on the misery inflicted on the parents. You have no idea how the hearts of parents may be bound up in their children, and what an amount of pleasure and pride there may be in the virtue and well-doing of a daughter. Think of the change—for pride, the deepest humiliation—for kindness, perhaps, life-long anger and reviling—for the deepest love, perhaps, bitter hatred. I have seen all this over and over again. I do not ask you to think of all this at the moment of temptation, but, in your calm moments seriously thinking of these things may strengthen you when you need it.

You will observe that I am avoiding speaking of religion as a means of strengthening you, because, although the strongest and best protection, it is scarcely in my province to dwell on it, and it is to other points that I feel called upon to lead your attention.

I must urge upon my young friends to consider the impropriety of the common custom of going a-courting merely for amusement. It is dishonourable, unjust, and degrading to the class to which you belong. It is dishonourable, because it necessarily involves deceit. No decent girl would receive you at late hours, and allow of the freedoms usual in what is called courting, if she did not believe either that you are in love or are likely to become so; therefore your going a-courting at all, if you have no serious intentions, is deceitful and dishonourable. It is unjust to the girl, and injurious to the purity of her mind, by making common and of no value those freedoms which, although innocent, should be reserved for an acknowledged lover; and it is degrading to the class to which you belong, because it necessarily lowers the purity and delicacy of the females of the working class, among whom alone such a method of flirtation would be allowed.

I have no wish to put a stop to your intercourse with young women, whether sweethearts or acquaintances. On the contrary, I would promote it to the utmost of my power. The company of females is an excellent thing for a young man—it puts him to his mettle to make himself agreeable, and it should purify and refine his mind. But I would have you to enjoy this intercourse openly and honourably, without the nonsensical secrecy and mystery which is the peculiarity of Scotland. In England, if a working-man have a sweetheart he is proud of it, and cares not if all the world should know. He visits the girl openly—takes her to merry makings or for a walk when he can—very likely he accompanies her to church on Sundays. Now, all this is a great source of pleasure. It enables them to see each other and enjoy each other's society in the midst of others, and it yields many opportunities for nice little bits of love-making. But, look at young people in love in Scotland. They must not be seen near each other, or manifest the least appearance of affection for fear of being laughed at; consequently, for any intercourse with each other, they must have recourse to clandestine meetings. Now, it is only in Scotland that this excessive mystery and secrecy in love matters is observed, and it is, in a great measure, confined to the working class.

I have now brought to a conclusion what I have to say. My object has been to set you thinking on this subject, in the hope that thereby you may be stirred up to do whatever may be in your power to remedy the evil.

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