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LESSONS ON POPULATION

SUGGESTED BY

Grecian and Roman History.

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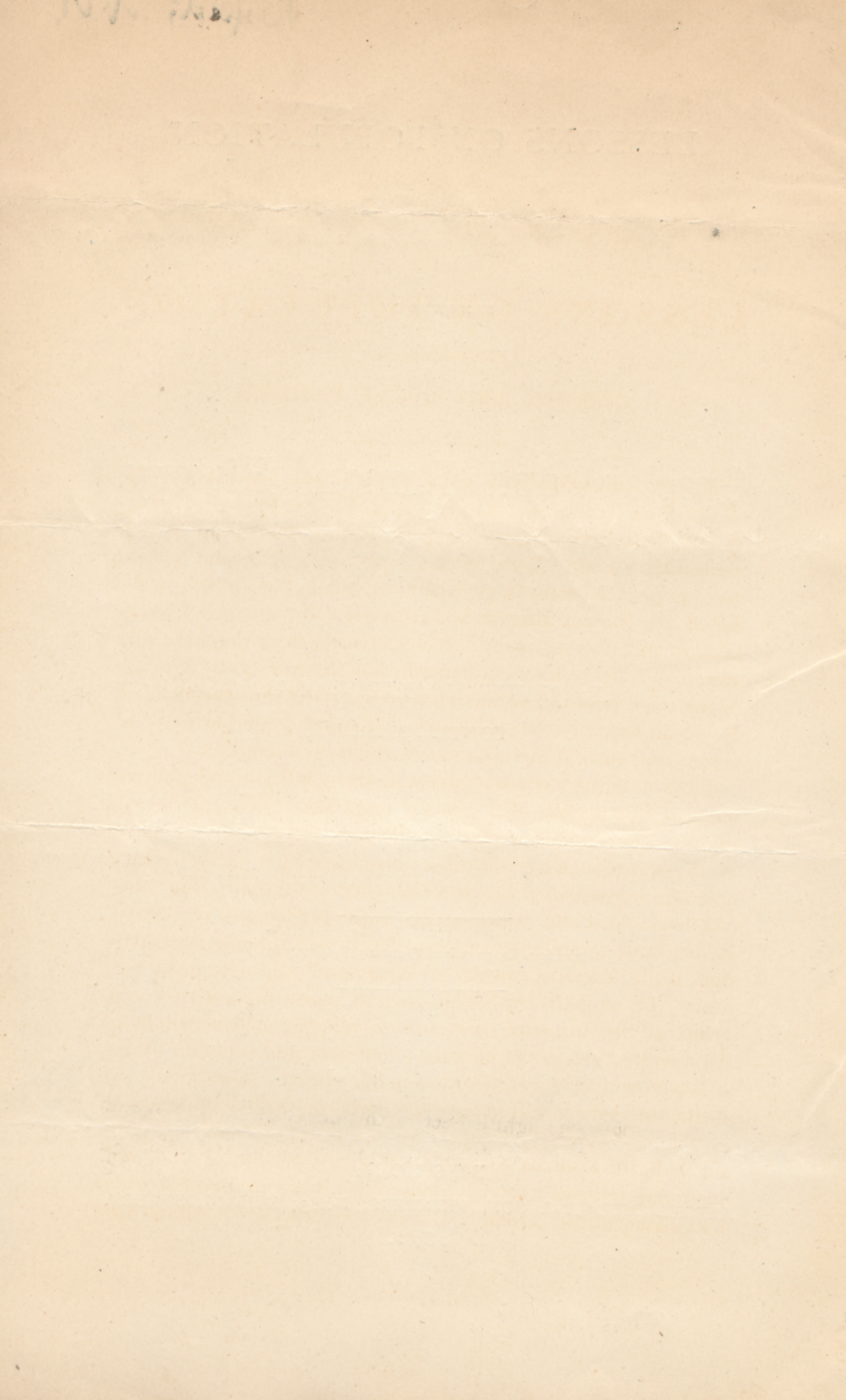
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LESSONS ON POPULATION

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GRECIAN AND ROMAN HISTORY.

RECENT investigations have thrown new light upon the downfall of Greece and Rome. J. R. Seeley, Prof. of History in the University of Cambridge (England), the author of that remarkable work, "Ecce Homo," has lately published several essays upon Roman Imperialism, in which the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire are analyzed with unusual discrimination and thoroughness. It would seem from the facts here stated and the opinions expressed, that the *real causes* of decay in this once powerful nation have been greatly misapprehended. Such, at least, is the necessary deduction from the facts he states, and such is the conclusion which he maintains.

After noticing various changes in the condition and government of this people, Prof. Seeley remarks: "We are forced, then, to the conclusion that the Roman Empire, in the midst of its greatness and civilization, must have been in a stationary and unprogressive, if not in a decaying condition. Now what can have been the cause of this unproductiveness or decay? It has been common to suppose that it was a moral degeneration in the Romans, caused by luxury and excessive good fortune. To support this, it is easy to quote the satirists and cynics of the Imperial time, and to refer to such accounts as Ammianus gives of the mingled effeminacy and brutality of the aristocracy of the capital in the fourth century. But the history of the wars between Rome and the barbaric world does not show us the proofs we might expect of this decay of spirit. We do not find the Romans ceasing to be victorious in the field, and beginning to show themselves inferior in valor to their enemies. The luxury of the capital could not affect the army, which had

no connection with the capital, but was levied from the peasantry of the whole empire, a class into which luxury can never penetrate. Nor can it be said that luxury corrupted the generals, and through them the army. On the contrary, the empire produced a remarkable series of capable generals. . . . Whatever the remote and ultimate cause may have been, *the immediate cause* to which the fall of the Roman Empire can be traced is a *physical*, not a moral decay. In valor, discipline, and science, the Roman armies remained what they always had been, and the peasant emperors of Illyricum were worthy successors of Cincinnatus and Caius Marius. But the problem was, how to replenish those armies. Men were wanting; the empire perished for want of men. Nor was it in the army only that the empire was compelled to borrow men from barbarism. To cultivate the fields, whole tribes were borrowed."

Prof. Seeley then proceeds to show, that in filling up the ranks of the army they had to depend not only more and more upon a barbaric element, but that in the cultivation of the soil and use of unoccupied lands, the country fell gradually into the hands of barbarian tribes, such as the Vandals, the Goths, the Franks, the Germans, etc. After noticing at some length the effects of these changes, he remarks, "Facts of this order stand in a much closer relation to the fall of the empire, than many which are habitually adduced to account for it. The drain of wealth to the East, fiscal oppression, the rapacity of officials, the tyranny by which the curiales, or respectable middle class of provincial towns, were crushed, the growth of servility and effeminacy, all these are causes which might, and probably did, bring on the ruin of the empire. But they were causes operating indirectly and indefinitely; and they ought not to divert our attention from the immediate and adequate cause,—that want of population which made it impossible to keep up a native army, and which caused a perpetual and irrepressible stream of barbaric immigration. The barbarian occupied the Roman Empire almost as the Anglo-Saxon is occupying North America; he settled and peopled, rather than conquered it."

From a careful review of Roman history, it seems that this want of increase of population commenced quite early. We are told that Julius Cæsar, when he attained to supreme power,

found an "alarming thinness of population"; and the returns of the census from the second Punic war to the time of Augustus, show "no steady increase of citizens that cannot be accounted for by the extension of citizenship to new classes." It has been very justly said, that wherever wars or destructive plagues prevail, a stationary population cannot bear such ravages so well as one that is progressive.

The marriage relation had become so much neglected, that it was found necessary to call the attention of the citizens repeatedly to the importance of this institution, and their duties in respect to it. Laws were passed granting special favors and privileges to induce men to assume this relation. It was found also that the increase of population was impeded by "infanticide," and attempts were made by legislation and other means to check this crime, but without much success. While "the aversion to marriage" and "the unwillingness to multiply" are mentioned as becoming stronger and stronger, the historian nowhere undertakes to explain the causes of such perversity of disposition.

After attempting to account for some changes, Prof. Seeley says: "Perhaps enough has now been said to explain that great enigma which so much bewilders the reader of Gibbon, namely, the sharp contrast between the age of the Antonines and the age that followed it. A century of unparalleled tranquillity and virtuous government is followed immediately by a period of hopeless ruin and dissolution. A century of rest is followed, not by renewed vigor, but by incurable exhaustion. Some principle of decay must clearly have been at work; but what principle? We answer, it was a period of sterility or barrenness in human beings; the human harvest was bad."

It may be remarked, in corroboration of the theory or conclusions of Seeley, that the prevalence of luxury and vice will, in any community and under all circumstances, tend to check the multiplication of the race; hence diminution of numbers was no more and nothing less than what we should look for. Admitting or knowing that a state or community has become thoroughly corrupt, we may assuredly predict of it, that, if left to its own course,—if the tide of moral corruption be not stemmed or stayed,—it will of necessity (by operation of

natural laws) dwindle and die out. But in such a state of things, the main cause may be of a physical nature, arising from changes in human organization.

We make only one quotation more from Prof. Seeley, preferring always to use his own language, lest it might be said that his statements or conclusions were not fairly represented. After describing the stationary condition of the Roman population, he says: "The same phenomenon had shown itself in Greece before its conquest by the Romans. There the population had even greatly declined; and the shrewd observer, Polybius, explains, that it was not owing to war or plague, but mainly to a general repugnance to marriage and reluctance to rear large families, caused by an extravagantly high standard of comfort."

This allusion to Greece has led us to examine somewhat carefully several different histories of this nation, but without finding much information or light shed upon this particular point. As far as any facts are stated or theories expressed on population, they harmonize perfectly with those already described as connected with Roman history. Polybius is the most discriminating writer on this topic, and it is needless to remark that no higher authority could be quoted. These are his words: "In our times, all Greece has been afflicted with a failure of offspring; in a word, with a scarcity of men; so that the cities have been left desolate, and the land waste, though we have not been visited either with a series of wars, or with epidemic diseases. Would it not be absurd to send to inquire of the Oracles by what means our numbers may be increased, and our cities become more flourishing, when the cause is manifest, and the remedy rests with ourselves? For when men give themselves up to ease and comfort and indolence, and would neither marry or rear children born out of wedlock, or at least only one or two, in order to leave these rich, and to bring them up in luxury, the evil soon spread, imperceptibly, but with rapid growth; for when there was only a child or two in a family for war or disease to carry off, the inevitable consequence was that houses were left desolate, and cities by degrees became like deserted hives. And there is no need to consult the gods about the mode of deliverance from this evil;

for any man would tell us that the first thing we have to do is to change our habits, or, at all events, to enact laws compelling parents to rear their children."

This statement of Polybius was applied to Greece long before its downfall, in fact at the time when this nation came under the government of Rome, and had been considered quite prosperous. But Polybius asserts that this decline in population commenced even before this period; at a time, too, when the nation was apparently enjoying a high state of prosperity. Such a change in population does not harmonize with the theory of Malthus, and some other writers on this subject.

We quote from one more writer, whose testimony in such matters must be good authority. Thirlwall, in the concluding chapter of his last volume on the History of Greece, has these remarks: "It has been usual in modern times to attribute this decline of population to the loss of independence; to the withering influence of a foreign yoke; in a word, to Roman misrule. But it seems certain that when the changes thus occasioned are represented as the main causes of the decline of population in Greece, their importance has been greatly exaggerated; while others, much more efficacious, have been overlooked or disregarded. For, on the other hand, it is clear that this decline did not begin at that epoch, but had been going on for many generations before. It is evident, on the whole, that the increase of population was not checked by oppression or by any calamity. The evil was not that the stream of population was violently absorbed, but that it flowed feebly, because there was an influence at work which tended to dry up the fountain head. Marriages were rare and unfruitful, through the prevalence of indifference, or aversion towards the duties and enjoyments of domestic life. The historian traces this unhealthy state of feeling to a taste for luxury and ostentation. But this explanation, which could only apply to the wealthy, seems by no means adequate to the result. The real cause struck deeper, and was much more widely spread. Described in general terms, it was a want of reverence for the order of nature, for the natural revelation of the will of God; and the sanction of infanticide was by no means the most destructive or the most loathsome form in which it manifested itself. This

cancer had been for many generations eating into the life of Greece." What this cancer was, apart from infanticide, the writer does not very clearly indicate ; but one thing is evident, that it was some violation of the laws of nature, thereby defeating the intentions of the Almighty in the propagation of man. The evil was so terrible, as, with kindred ones, to strike a death-blow at the prosperity of Greece.

Are there not facts resembling the above in the history of our own country?¹ May we not as a people be passing through certain changes in population similar to those stated in these extracts from the histories of Greece and Rome? Let us see what comparisons may be instituted.

First. That there has been a gradual decline in the relative increase of our *native* population is very evident. Town and family records show that the first settlers had on an average to each family about eight children, and that this average has steadily decreased with each generation ; so that from the best statistics which can be obtained, it is doubtful whether the average number of children to every married couple at the present time exceeds three, certainly it does not reach four.

If we apply here a fact settled by mortuary statistics, that about two fifths of all children born die before reaching adult life, the chances for natural increase of population surely cannot be large. Again, if a comparison is instituted between the annual birth rate and death rate of our people, it will be seen at once that the margin left for increase is very small. In fact, these two great integers of life and death have for many years been approaching nearer and nearer to each other. This change has gained rapidly in the present century, and is becoming more and more marked with each successive generation. If it continues increasing half a century or more, what is to be the result? And when the change reaches the point that the offspring do not make good in numbers the producing stock, will not the ratio of decrease become much more rapid?

Again, while families consisting of eight or ten children were once quite common, now they are found only here and there. Formerly the number of married couples without offspring was proportionately small ; but such families have every year

¹ The local references in this paper apply more particularly to New England.

been constantly increasing, so much so, that it is estimated that the number having no children, or only one, compose now about one third of all New England families.

Closely connected with this topic, there is another ominous feature of the times, viz., that the marriage rate is relatively decreasing; especially is this the case among the more intelligent classes, and those favored with worldly means. In fact, there are strong evidences to show, that the marriage institution itself, with all its sacred objects, as laid down in the formulas, whether prescribed by church or state, is treated every year with less and less consideration. The relation is coming to be viewed more and more in the light of a partnership; as a matter of convenience and comfort; in other words, to be based more and more upon the supremely selfish traits of human nature. As one of the elements entering into this question, children are regarded as a burden and expense; no inconvenience or sacrifice can be submitted to for their sakes. With some, at the outset, it is a settled question, a foregone conclusion, to have no trouble from this source; while with others there is a fixed determination that the cares and responsibilities from such a quarter shall be very limited.

Again, connected with and partly growing out of this selfish view of marriage, the sacredness and permanence of the institution set lightly upon such parties. Causes for divorce are easily found. It makes a wonderful difference with the permanence of an institution, whether it be regarded as a matter of individual, personal convenience, or as based upon a divine command.

This decline in the marriage rate, and this growing instability of the institution, must have an influence upon the great question of population. Besides, if divorces continue to multiply as they have done for a few years past, this will certainly tend to weaken the relation, and make it more and more unstable. And there are agencies, if we mistake not, operating in society, some silently, others more publicly, that look strongly in this direction; among which, some things uttered by the advocates of Woman's Rights, so called, should not escape notice. While it is admitted that woman has suffered many wrongs in society, and that there are good grounds for

her greater improvement in health, employment, position, etc., we fear the manner and spirit with which her claims, together with the right of suffrage, are sought to be obtained, will have a tendency, in many cases, not only to prevent marriage, but directly and indirectly will be instrumental in *causing* numerous divorces. In fact, some of the leaders in this movement avow sentiments that are decidedly hostile to the sanctity and perpetuity of the marriage relation, and which, if practically carried out, would break up entirely the family institution.

In this connection, it may not be improper to consider more particularly that criminal practice which prevailed more or less, both in Greece and Rome, and which is mentioned by different writers as having had an influence in checking their population, — and that, too, in spite of legislation, — viz., “infanticide,” or fœticide. The existence of this practice at the present day is abundantly testified to, not in newspapers and medical journals only, but by our statute books, which fail, as of old, to eradicate the evil. Nor is this, perhaps, to be so much wondered at, when we consider that in this, as in all cases of “imperfect obligation,” so called, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to reach the evil by acts of positive legislation. Notwithstanding all the efforts of legislators and philanthropists, it still lurks among us in a variety of forms, doing its deadly work, sometimes even showing a disposition to vindicate itself in the face of day ; and in the opinion of many who have investigated the subject most carefully, it has at the present time a perceptible influence on population. But its history, its extent, and its effects cannot well be traced here, for the reason that, like certain social evils, it ordinarily shuns the light ; it is personal, secret, occupying the very lowest scale amongst the “deeds of darkness.”

And further, as it would be difficult to determine which are the most common, *the arts of prevention*, or *the acts of destruction*, so it might be equally difficult to decide which are the most pernicious ; but one thing is certain, they are all, in motive, in inception, and in execution, criminal in the sight of the Creator. They violate one of the most important of his organic laws ; they aim to defeat one great, primary object

for which the sexes, as such, were created. Upon what other class of sins (unless we may except idolatry) did the judgments of God, as described in the Old Testament, fall with more severity? And in the case of Greece and Rome surely, these judgments, which are the penalties of violated law, were not withheld! We say judgments, for certainly the consequences of this practice were so mischievous and so fearful, that they may well be styled judgments, — a direct retribution for crime or disobedience. Can we expect that its influences will be less pernicious in these latter days, or its consequences less baleful? Can we expect a change in the moral government of God, or an amelioration of his judgments on such offences in our own land and in our own times? Most assuredly His laws cannot be violated with impunity.

There is another class of facts connected with the history of Greece and Rome, that has its parallel in some respects in our own history. Both these nations were more or less filled up by the transfer or emigration of people from other countries. This change of population was effected in part by war; but trade, education, and other attractions also drew large numbers into Greece and Rome. This foreign or barbarian element was much more prolific than that of the native inhabitants of those two nations. Neither was there a mixing up, or intermarrying to much extent, between the two classes. As a natural consequence, the purely native stock declined relatively in numbers, fading gradually away; and not only were they finally outnumbered, but they were overpowered both in war and in every department of government, as well as of society. This was their weakest point; it stole upon them so imperceptibly and covertly as to undermine the foundations of society before they actually realized their situation or danger.

Are there not changes going on quietly in New England similar in some respects to the above? Within a half century there has grown up already in Massachusetts a foreign element by birth and parentage, equal to almost one third of its whole population. This foreign element is increasing far more rapidly than the native class, having relatively nearly one third more births every year than the strictly American peo-

ple. This element in the States of Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont is as yet comparatively small, though steadily increasing. But in Rhode Island and Connecticut it is much larger, bearing to the American a similar proportion to what it does in Massachusetts. Now, if the same relative increase in the two classes continues fifty or one hundred years, what a change will be wrought in the character of our population? If the young people from the native stock should continue moving to the West and the South in the same proportion as they have for the last twenty or thirty years, and should there be the same decrease in births as there has been for the last fifty years in the same class, there will certainly be great changes, not only in numbers, but in power and influence. In a republican government, it has been said, "brains rule." This is true to some extent; but there is a power which brains do not always control, viz., *ballots*. Without forecasting or prophesying anything further in this direction, which is not at all agreeable, we leave the reader to draw his own inferences.

In view of the facts stated above, two questions naturally arise: 1st, What are the causes? and, 2d, What are to be the results?

It is true there is a wide difference between the civilization, character, condition, etc., of the Grecians and Romans, and that of our own people; still there may be in some respects certain resemblances, or similar physical developments, which may lead to corresponding results. While we have no means of obtaining definite knowledge of the physical organization of these ancient people, the comparison can be carried on only by general inferences. But human nature was the same two thousand years ago as to-day; its physical laws will ever remain the same, and, to a certain extent, will always bear the same fruits. In attempting to answer the questions here raised, we can indicate only a few points, or suggest certain lines of inquiry; time and space will not allow a complete exposition of our theory on population, or a thorough discussion of the subject in all its bearings. The facts stated above as to the *natural* increase, or rather want of population, afford a favorable opportunity to explain and illustrate some points connected with this theory.

The great law of propagation is based upon the perfect development of man's physical organization. Such was the intent and design of the Creator. Such is the nature and necessity of the law as developed in human organism. This perfection consists in a complete, harmonious development and healthy action of all the organs in the system. And in proportion as you depart from this harmony or balance, developing any particular class of organs to an abnormal or extreme extent, this great law of propagation is at once affected. With this change come in the laws of hereditary descent, which of course have a powerful agency. To illustrate the theory, let us take three different points of view.

Wherever are found the most harmonious development and healthy action of all the organs in the human system, there population will multiply the fastest, provided there is no violation of physical laws, other things being equal, such as climate, food, etc. Illustrations of this class may be found among the English, the Scotch, the Irish, the German, the Canadian French, and the first settlers of New England.

Take now the extreme development of a purely animal nature, where the mind has received but little or no cultivation, and there is a deficiency in the nervous system and the finer physical qualities. Here, in the direction of this gross and sensual nature, God has wisely set limitations to the great law of propagation, so that no such tribe or people can multiply or flourish much through many generations. Illustrations of this type may be found in certain tribes in Africa, in the South Sea Islanders, and the North American Indians.

Let us now look at the other extreme in society, where there is a great predominance of the nervous temperament. Here the brain and the nervous system have been highly cultivated for a long time to the neglect of other parts of the body. Continued excitement and strain of all the mental faculties, the refinements and fashions of an artificial state of society, etc., gradually work a change, not only in the relations between body and mind as a whole, but in the relative proportions of the former, as well as in the different faculties of the latter. There follows a loss of muscular power generally, as well as deficiency in the vital forces, which depend upon a

well-developed, sanguine, and lymphatic temperament. The reproductive organs suffer too, by becoming in some respects enervated and relaxed, and again, by assuming a more artificial, irritable, and capricious character. In the case of woman the change is specially marked. There is not only increased liability to weakness and disease, but the organs of gestation and lactation are particularly impaired, thereby disabling her more or less for the bearing and nursing of offspring. It affects also the marital relations, as well as the parental and domestic. There is not found in such an organization the same instinctive fondness of children, and willingness to make sacrifices for them. Instead of love of home, domestic work, and care of children, there is the craving for excitement, fondness for society, devotion to fashion, ambition for public life, etc. It is needless to say that such changes affect powerfully the great law of propagation.

The Greeks and Romans, so far as we can judge of their physical organizations, were striking specimens of this type of character; and probably no other people approximate so nearly towards the same physical standard as the present inhabitants of New England. It does not follow that external influences or the character of a people should be precisely the same in all respects, to produce similar changes or effects in physical organization. The agents may vary in a variety of ways, but the results in the main correspond. In the extracts referring to the fall of Greece and Rome, there are two points to which we invite particular attention. Prof. Seeley says of Rome, the cause was "*physical*, not a moral decay"; that it was manifested in the "want of population," which arose from a "period of sterility," a "general reluctance to rear families."

Now, what was "this principle of decay," if it was not a change in *physical organization*, which in some way interfered with the great law of propagation? There certainly must be such a law based somewhere in the human constitution, whether the theory here advanced be correct or not. A distinguished French writer makes this remark, that "just in proportion as individuals or a community become perfected in civilization, in the same proportion the race inclines to run out." The truth of this statement—the result of extended

observation—is based upon the fact, that an undue or great predominance of the nervous temperament, especially if it exists in both parties, is decidedly unproductive, and that the evil is manifested in a variety of ways. This fact can clearly be proved from the laws of physiology, and is abundantly confirmed by illustrations from history and every-day life. It is a fundamental law, applicable not only to the human race, but, in a certain degree, to the whole animal creation. In attempts to perfect the breed of domestic animals, it has been found that there were limits beyond which the law of propagation cannot go without extinguishing the stock.

The point referred to in Greece was an "aversion to marriage," an "unwillingness to raise up children," arising from "*an extravagantly high standard of comfort.*" The cause here assigned, in remarkably striking language, is one full of meaning, and if it had such an influence with the Greeks, it certainly has, at the present day, a more powerful influence upon our people.

As to the nervous temperament, if only here and there one had a great predominance, its effect on population would be very limited; but when it comes to this, that all or nearly all the community have such an organization, its effect on human increase is powerful. So when nearly every individual is seeking supremely that "*extravagantly high standard of comfort,*" with all the energy, perseverance, and ingenuity he can command, many things standing in the way of it must and will be sacrificed. If the marriage or parental relation is thought in any way to conflict with this object, *it must be sacrificed.*

As a people, we have set up a "high standard of comfort," that is extravagant and too expensive; it has too many wants, and requires such an amount of physical stamina and brain power as to result in premature exhaustion. This standard is based too much on mere wealth, and the selfish nature of man; it is not calculated to develop harmoniously, or in the most healthy manner, all parts of the human body; nor to aid, as it should, in developing the moral and religious character of man in accordance with the revealed will of God.

As to the results of such a type of organization, they were

determined, in the case of Greece and Rome, near two thousand years ago,—the former flourishing some six hundred years, and the latter five hundred. It is now two hundred and fifty years since the first settlement of New England, and as a people, we are already reaching a crisis—a culminating point in history—where it is becoming a question whether there is from year to year any actual increase or not of native population. And if a decline once commence, the *decrease* may be rapid. We cannot well deceive ourselves if we would, for there are agents or causes working gradually and quietly, which seriously threaten the best interests of our people. Is there not a “principle of decay” operating to destroy the vitality and perpetuity of the Puritan stock? Must the historian ascribe its downfall to ignominious causes, similar to those which wrought the ruin of Greece and Rome? Can there not be brought to bear redeeming influences from the family, the school, the church, or the press, sufficient to prevent a result so sad and inglorious? It may not be inappropriate to apply here the old maxim in reference to another department of the divine government, “Though the mills of the gods grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small.”

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