

PALMER. (E.R.)

A Contribution to the Physiology of Sexual Impotence.

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I ASK your attention to a subject full of interest and hard to handle, yet of paramount importance to every one. It lies in the borderland between the purely scientific on the one hand and the possibly prurient on the other. For want of a better title I have chosen as a somewhat paradoxical yet suggestive heading The Physiology of Impotence. If in what I may say I can formulate anything that shall make plainer than they are to-day the unwritten laws of healthy sexual living, I shall rest content. If I am not always rock-ribbed by the confines of cold science, I trust that the delicate nature of my theme will plead my excuse. By healthy sexual living I mean the legitimate pleasurable performance of the sexual act at proper intervals through life by both sexes without impairment of health and over a maximum period of time as time is measured by human life.

We are met at the very outset by the problem of evolu-

* Read before the American Society of Genito-urinary Surgeons.

tion, and modifications under domestication confront the subject at every turn. Man, representing as he does the highest type of perversion by domestication, is to be studied as performing the sexual act in season and out of season, before puberty and in senility, irrespective of all laws either of Nature or of nation, at the risk of every loss, even that of honor, and least of all for the purpose of procreation. Beyond even the danger of a passing challenge it may be said of humanity that for more than any other finite possibility it lives for sexual living, and so may he rank as most a benefactor who shall, respecting this phase of life, outline the measures most conducive to the attainment of the greatest pleasure for the greatest number.

I would divide the subject into two sections: First, physiological impotence of the male without any regard to sterility; and, second, physiological impotence of the female with a like disregard of her procreative powers, avoiding as far as possible all of the many pathological influences and effects that are recognized by the profession as factors in this connection.

Of the male human being it may be said that he begins sexual life as a masturbator. The various reasons that have been assigned as explanatory of this habit are possibly all more or less correct. Just here I shall attempt neither to explain nor to controvert them, but simply, accepting the fact, to deal with its bearing on the future sexual life of the individual. Given a youth of approaching maturity; he has learned the evils of his way; he wants to be a man; he has quit, or at least has fully determined to do so, and he comes to the doctor for help. To his mind his case is indeed grave. He suffers with nocturnal pollutions, and, having read what he could find on the subject, he realizes what he deems the fearful error of his past life. He has attempted to perform the sexual act *à la mode*, but has

failed most miserably, and so, with nothing left in life worth living for without sexual manhood, he tearfully begs for relief, hoping against hope that the great science to which he has appealed may possibly redeem him from that impotence that to his disturbed mind seems but to assure a future worse even than death.

It is not alone from the pamphlet of the catchpenny quack, but from the teachings of the regular profession as well, that he gets at least a part of the groundwork of his despair. To say to such a youth that in absolute continence, sedatives, circumcision, and the cold sound lie his only hope is, to my mind, whatever it may be from a moral standpoint, advice at variance with Nature and so in conflict with science; and, in face of the exceptional cases of physical wreck that self-abuse has wrought, I would maintain that its influence, recognizing its almost universality of performance in boyhood, has been not only wrongly estimated, but most unwisely exaggerated. In explanation of this statement I would say: Given any healthy-born youth of twenty who began masturbation at, say, twelve and followed the habit with considerable frequency and regularity during the eight subsequent years, at the same time indulging in ball-playing, swimming, and studying, eating, sleeping, and living like his fellows—such a youth, were it possible to blot from his memory the recollection of his past self-abuse with his relinquishment of the habit, would, as a rule, retain but one of the evils it may entail, and that one I do not find emphasized in print either by moralists or by scientists—namely, to transmit the inclination to the habit to his offspring.

We do not have to study Zola's history of the Rougon family or the annals of crime generally to be reminded of the transmissibility of the passions and their perversions in the germ-plasm from parent to offspring. It is thus largely

that all vices are perpetuated. That such a youth as I have just described would suffer with pollutions, nocturnal, possibly diurnal, is quite probable, but I can not agree either that this disgusting tendency is solely the fruit of masturbation or that the inability of a youth to properly perform the sexual act is necessarily due to his having been a masturbator in earlier years. If a man from childhood to the marriage hour lives a morally spotless life, it does not follow either that he will not have had involuntary emissions, or that he will be able to copulate successfully at the first or, for that matter, the tenth attempt on the marital couch. Cases demonstrative in both instances can be cited to prove the fallacy of such doctrines.

We can not fail to recognize the habit of self-abuse as environed by numerous possible evils, but let us at least avoid the rule of portraying it as universally horrible and hurtful. Rather let us encourage and sustain the penitent with assurances of a manly future of physical well-being. What are the enviroing evils of masturbation? I suppose, among different replies to the query, all would practically agree that the chief was excessive indulgence, exercising that same evil upon the young that tobacco, alcohol, all-night card-playing, excessive copulation, where possible, and the like exercise; the manifest evil that any often repeated and severe tax must exert on the plastic tissues of early life; and, accepting this view of the question, I am willing to place self-abuse first, with alcohol and tobacco running neck-and-neck at its saddle-girth for second place in the race of ruin. Yet even here must I take issue with the popular dictum. It is thus often said by those who agree that mere masturbation *per se* is not so hurtful, that it is the opportunity for excesses in that direction and the widespread abuse of such opportunity that make masturbation a common curse. In contradiction of this popular

idea, I make free to state that, as a clinical fact, in only quite a small minority of instances is such excessive indulgence the rule. The boy is father to the man; his instincts with each added year point more and more that way. The very secrecy that the habit entails is his safeguard. That same spirit that leads him, almost before his feet touch the floor beneath the mahogany, to sip his post-prandial *pousse-café* with all the nonchalance of an old clubman or to puff his vile cigarette on the avenue, is a part of the same intuition that makes him despise the unmanly vice of masturbation, and as he emerges from childhood each indulgence comes only after a mental battle against its performance—a battle in which manliness loses in the indulgence and yet wins in the new resolve that is born of the malaise and disgust that follow, delaying its repetition to within almost physiological bounds and soon enabling him to throw off the habit altogether or, in manly resolve, seek the aid of our profession.

What, then, is this impotence of youth for which we are so often consulted? Wherein lies the fault? Wherein is to be found the remedy? The fault rests largely in the common misconception with which the emission of semen is viewed by nearly every one, the medical profession included. The youth is taught that semen is a marvelous product, a thousandfold more precious than even blood itself; that a definite, an inflexible limit is placed by Nature on man's capacity to produce it; that he is charged, so to speak, at birth with a limited amount of the precious fluid; and so, therefore, by the most natural logic of the case, he is led to believe that in the prodigality of his early solitary indulgences he has largely, if not wholly, expended his stock of this priceless fluid, until matrimony, with happy home and healthy family, is barred to him forever; so that, like the despairing soul at the gateway of Perdi-

tion, he lifts his eyes but to read above the doorway of his future: "All hope they leave behind who enter here." That such should not only be a popular doctrine, but should secure at any rate the tacit indorsement of our profession, is, to my mind, not only an egregious error, but a blunder unwarranted either by analogy or by fact.

We see its teachings shown, not alone in the melancholy youth, but in the adult of middle life also, who not only exercises his will power to economize his stock, but bemoans the involuntary nocturnal pollution that results, as another precious charge futilely expended from his rapidly ebbing magazine of pleasure. It is like the dread of the Bogie man that, taught to the child in the nursery, leads him to fear the dark in later years, a false tradition that the sooner we get rid of the better. What an anomaly it would be in the eternal fitness of things if there should be a special law in Nature thus confining that phase of life by which life itself is perpetuated! A curse, rather, and its conception in human philosophy is as irrational as it is untrue. What evidence have we, either by analogy or by clinical facts, that in the regular use of the testicles they, like glands and organs generally, are not developed and strengthened rather than weakened and exhausted? May we not say, rather, that within reasonable bounds a natural, regular, and frequent use of the sexual organs tends to an increase of their power, and, accepting the fact of occasional instances of overtax, at the same time should we not equally recognize the hurtful influences of irregular use and continence in many cases of failure sexually, rather than attribute all such failures to a worn-out condition of the sexual apparatus? Want of use or unphysiological irregularity in that direction explains, to my mind, in a large degree that impotence of youth that other men, from a different standpoint, are prone to moralize

about. The impotence of youth is the impotence of inexperience, rather than incapacity. He tries and fails, not because of any previous exhaustion of his powers, but rather because of their imperfect development and training. As the single julep or the first cigar turns his stomach or splits his head throughout the restless night, so the early copulation, imperfectly performed, surrounded as it is by such strangely unnerving phases, drags at his loins and runs riot with his heart for more than one day after the indulgence.

To such an abashed youth, depressed by his involuntary pollutions, overpowered by the Bogie-man idea, and because of his failure, in despair of his manhood, I would speak somewhat after this fashion: My dear boy, you have not lost your manhood; you rather have not found it. Your failure is the natural failure of the novice. One must learn to properly use, and in so using to develop, his physical powers sexually just as his other powers have been exercised and developed. You were a toddling infant once; now you possess the graces of Delsarte. Be patient, and above all be not afraid, and in due time all will be well with you. Marry if you so desire; better to marry than to burn, but, above all things, whether you marry or remain single, don't be cast down; cowardice begotten of sexual ignorance and fostered by false tradition is what impotence often means to the otherwise healthy youth.

Turning from the physiological impotence of the male youth, we are confronted with the question of sexual failure in the otherwise healthy man in the prime of middle life—the man who between forty and fifty seeks our advice for relief of failing or lost virility. Here, again, is to be met and combated the common explanation: "You are reaping the fruits of the self-abuse of your youth or the excesses of your early life. You have, by one or both of these means, worn out your precious powers, and there is no hope for

you." Yet, in face of such doctrine, no commoner instances of early loss of virility can anywhere be found than in the ranks of those very men who not only were not addicted to excessive self-abuse in boyhood, and who have not been libertines in later years, but who instead justly enjoy in the community in which they live the reputation of being moral, orderly family men, noted for their always strict observance of all those laws that the most moral living enjoins. In such cases, and also, indeed, in those of a parallel age, where the accusation of early excesses is perhaps more tenable, omitting the influences of disease and perversion, what other causes of impotence than exhaustion may we recognize? There are several: First, there is the not inconsiderable group represented by the man, not passionate by nature, who, possessing the extremest conception of morality, has never exercised his sexual powers when he could help it, and then only in a perfunctory way. His feeble physical development sexually is father to his premature decay. Another class contains those who, recognizing the partial waning of their powers, begin assiduously to practice economy in that direction, hoping to conserve where in reality they by continence destroy.

The athlete would hardly shut himself in his room to save his muscles for the coming contest by so doing, yet that is practically what the economical middle-aged man is constantly doing sexually. The scholar does not sit down and gaze blankly into space to save the brain power he developed at college, and yet men are doing the like constantly in their sexual living. The athlete may overtrain, the student break down from too close application to study, and yet the law maintains that by use, not by disuse, by regular systematic exercise, are all of the organs of our bodies developed and kept at the fullness of their powers.

Still another and probably the largest class of healthy middle-aged impotents is represented by the man who is absorbed in business cares and worries. He feels that he is no longer a boy; life has become to him a solemn reality, and so, whether weary from coupon-clipping or worn out from futile efforts at kiting accommodation paper, he feels anything but kittenish when bed-time comes. It is then my belief that, within confines broader than those encompassing the rules of orthodox practices, man may and does by use develop, strengthen, and preserve the integrity of his sexual organs, and that the integrity, requirements, and possibilities of the germ-plasm apparatus are regulated by the same physiological laws that govern the somatoplasm organs of the rest of the individual.

Recognizing the high order of office allotted to the seminiferous organs and the consequent complex nervous relationship that they possess, I yet maintain that continence means atrophy, that disuse means decay; and not only this, but that the influence of persistent continence upon the individual, whether male or female, is to dwarf and in many respects destroy the breadth and fullness of physical and intellectual individuality. Some one has said that normal decay of virility is reached in the male human being at sixty-five. Individual instances of virility at fourscore years or more abound; comparatively few men, however, preserve such power beyond two and a half or three score years. Of those who do I may mention as illustrating what I have said a class known to all of us as the "men about town." They are to be met with at the club, on the betting stand at the race-course, or on the avenue of a pleasant afternoon, well trimmed, well dressed, carrying none of life's burdens they can possibly shift to other shoulders, living for themselves alone, and bent daily and nightly on getting all out of life they can—short-winded

somewhat from their terrapin padding, with Burgundy twinges in their fingers and toes, yet for all this keeping up a fairly clever pace with the younger set, relying on the Turkish bath in winter and a sea voyage or mountain trip in summer to keep them on the-turf for a few years longer. Come what may, they have learned the art, and so still enjoy the fruition of ideal sexual living.

The male pervert has no place in the physiology of sexual living. To chronicle his vagaries as others have done would be but to pander to pruriency and so to further foster unnatural vices. To make my object plain, which is a plea for healthier sexual living, the study of the maid, wife, and mother, from the standpoint of physiological impotence, is essential. The ideal young woman is almost necessarily impotent. From time immemorial the prerequisites in her moral and social qualifications have been modesty and chastity. Those lapses from absolutely virtuous living that in the male are condoned as charming little irregularities, when indulged in on her part, invariably call down upon her luckless personality a damnation worse than death, at the same time often barring her from her highest mission—maternity. That a universal law, acting through the ages, calling for unquestioned chastity in the maid and mother, should have had its effect in a large proportion of the sex in modifying the sexual organs and desires is not surprising; that it has not absolutely extirpated feminine sensuality is perhaps more surprising. The typical female impotent, then, is by no means a rarity. To her, in her life as maid, wife, or mother, sensuality is an inconceivable possibility. She loves, marries, yields, and bears children, happy, in a quiet way, in making others happy, playing her unobtrusive part in the quiet drama of life in absolute ignorance, personally, of that passion that, more than all other things combined, has fostered the finer arts

or pitted man against man in deadly strife. Without effect on her procreative powers, her evolution has equipped her with rudimentary organs of copulation. With a cool, contracted ostium vaginae deep sunken beneath the symphysis, with pale, thin labia, and a clitoris scarcely discernible by the most erudite touch, she represents the embodiment of the social ideal, whose happiness throughout life, at best of a negative type, is endangered only by her finding out her physical shortcomings and vainly striving toward its correction. This, however, is but an extreme ideal type; the opposite extreme, as previously indicated, is also often to be found, environed by dangers that only too often bear for the possessor most bitter fruits. It is neither with the hopeless first class nor with the often luckless second that I would deal; both are practically beyond redemption. But of the great mass of femininity lying between these two I would speak as a class only too commonly neglected, misunderstood, and misused by the over-developed male.

The sexual phase of sociology in its evolution has drifted the sexes widely apart. In the typical male, physical excitation is no longer an essentiality. A thought, a passing phantasy suffices to give full play to his sexual powers, while with the average female not only is contact necessary, but a retardation of response and a limited area of receptive excitability are the rule. That in the wild state of vertebrates all the tangible sexual organs, and notably the vaginal tract, act responsively to masculine contact during congress is evident, while the insensitive labia, vagina, and uterus of the average human female leave but the clitoris in its out-of-the-way location as an organ of possible excitation. To any one who has witnessed the evident mutual pleasure that occurs in the sexual congress of a stallion and mare, but one explanation of such result, viewed from the imperfect and

clumsy action of the male, is possible, and that is that the mere intromission of his organ into a sexually highly sensitive vagina supplies the one essential to mutual gratification.

In conclusion, then, I would say that the primarily ruling causes in sexual impotence and incompatibility to-day are evolutionary in their nature; that in the average being the influence of heredity acting through the ages has made man abnormally and perversely sensual and woman sluggish to a degree little short of absolute incapacity; that in this, as in other of the physical errors of our inheritances, the skill of science may and should be evoked for the common good. Necessarily it is through the male alone that such teachings may be brought to bear as shall correct this congenital disparity. He should, before entering upon the marriage state, be instructed in the laws I have outlined. He should be counseled in those means best calculated to encourage delay of the orgasm on his part, and the awakening of desire and its physiological development upon the part of his mate. He should be taught that happy sexual living means something more than selfish personal enjoyment. He should be reminded that in the holy life in the marriage-bed, awaiting his touch, are chords that shall vibrate in the years to come concordantly or discordantly, as he alone may determine. He should be impressed that, whatever the experiences of his past single life may have been, he has, in taking his marriage vows, assumed a sacred duty demanding on his part gentle, patient, and unselfish practices, by which may most certainly be assured that mutual happiness that, linked with mutual sexual pleasure, most strongly binds husband and wife together.



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