

Physical Decadence.

THE INFLUENCE OF DRESS IN PRODUCING THE PHYSICAL DECADENCE OF AMERICAN WOMEN.

By J. H. KELLOGG, M.D.,*

Sanitarium, Battle Creek, Michigan.

AS my subject suggests, I am to undertake to show that certain features of the mode of dress common among civilised American women have been, and are, a prominent factor in producing a widespread and marked physical deterioration among the women of this country. Possibly the question may be asked whether such a deterioration exists. It is not probable, however, that it will be worth while to spend any considerable time in attempting to demonstrate the proposition that American women are degenerating physically, before an audience made up chiefly of medical men and women; for has there been a Medical Convention dinner within the last quarter of a century at which there was not heard the familiar toast, "Woman—God's best gift to man, and the chief support of the doctors"?

A few months ago I addressed an audience of six or seven hundred young women at an educational centre in a neighbouring State, upon the subject of physical culture. As my audience seemed to be an amiable one, I ventured to ask a few questions, and among other enquiries, asked how many women present (all of whom had reached adult age) believed themselves to be physically superior to their mothers. A bare half dozen raised their hands, and two or three of them timidly looked about, apparently to see if any one present was prepared to contest their claim.

One of the most convincing evidences of the physical failure of American women is to be found in the fact developed by the last census of the United States, that there has been, in the last ten years, an enormous falling off in the birth-rate, as the result of which several million babies are lacking. A lowered birth-rate is a much more serious matter than an increased death-rate, although the immediate result as regards the population might be the same. An increased death-rate may mean nothing more than a temporary increase in the activity of one or more of the causes of disease and death, while a lowered birth-rate means a radical and constitutional fault of some sort, threatening the very existence of the race. Any one who has had an opportunity to become acquainted with the physical condition of the average young woman of the present generation will be easily convinced that the next census will show a still greater falling off in the birth-rate than the last. A corset-choked woman knows very well that she is quite unfit, physically, for the rearing of children; and besides the physical unfitness she finds herself so lacking in fortitude, and so oppressed with nerves and neuralgias and an abnormal susceptibility to pain, that she very naturally shrinks from the physical ordeal, as well as the mental and moral responsibility, which motherhood involves.

Another most significant fact, for which mothers must

be held largely responsible, is the enormous business carried on at the present time in the manufacture and sale of infant foods. According to a paper read by Dr. Hoffman, before the American Association for the Advancement of Science, at its last meeting, there is consumed in the United States every year, not less than eight or ten million dollars' worth of infant foods. That these foods are rarely, if ever, perfect substitutes for the child's natural aliment, is well known. What has created such an enormous demand for these substitutes? Certainly it is not the unnatural increase of the number of infants which has exhausted the natural food supply; for I have already mentioned that there has been, in the last ten years, a falling off in the birth-rate amounting to several millions.

These evidences point with tremendous emphasis to the fact of the decline of stamina in American women. A host of other facts confirming and supporting those given, might be brought forward; but I will not thus unnecessarily consume your time, since the proposition is not likely to be disputed by any intelligent physician who has had wide opportunities for observation.

But I must not devote more of the half hour allotted me to introductory remarks. Fully realising that I am likely to incur the displeasure of some of my fair auditors before I have done with my subject, I may as well declare myself at once as prepared to defend the proposition that the average civilised American woman is deformed. This very uncomplimentary proposition doubtless impresses my hearers as somewhat startling. Nevertheless, I believe the evidence which I shall present will convince the majority of you that, however repulsive and distressing the fact may be, it is true.

A penchant for modifying the natural form of the body so as to produce deformity in some part, seems to prevail quite extensively in the human race, although it must be admitted that in many savage, and some civilised tribes, this strange propensity takes a less dangerous direction than among the civilised races. The Indian woman of Alaska ornaments her upper lip with a pin stuck through it. Among the women of some other savage tribes, fashion demands that a fish-bone or a piece of wood be inserted in the under lip in a similar fashion, by means of which the flesh is dragged down and a strange deformity produced. The civilised woman finds the lobe of her ear a more convenient place from which to hang her jewellery, and so she bores a hole through this part of her body and inserts a wire weighted with a stone, and thus emulates the example of her savage sisters. There are mothers roaming in the forest, shoeless, hatless, and without other garments than a bark apron and the picturesque designs of the tattooer's pencil, whose solicitude for their children leads them to compress their heads into cones, or to shape them to a fascinating flatness by the steady pressure of a board against the infant skull. Other mothers, less barbarous, but none the less anxious for the welfare of their little ones, squeeze the feet of their daughters into shapeless masses of bone and gristle, in the firm belief that no young lady can make an eligible bride if her foot exceeds in measure the conventional three inches. Still, other mothers, more civilised, and none the less fondly thoughtful of their daughters' interests, base their expectations of a successful career for them as much upon the meagre dimensions of their waists as upon the comeliness of their countenances or the brilliancy of their accomplishments.

* "Annual Address upon Obstetrics and Gynecology," delivered before the Michigan State Medical Society at the Annual Meeting held at Saginaw.

[previous page](#)

[next page](#)