

## Physical Decadence.

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

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(2) **A** SECOND question to which I invite attention is, Why does the waist of the civilised woman cease to grow at the age of 10 or 12 years, while the rest of the body continues to develop? Lungs, liver, stomach, spleen, bowels, pancreas—all the organs which occupy the region of the waist line, continue to grow, but the waist of the civilised woman absolutely refuses to increase in size, notwithstanding the developing force beneath it, after the age of 12 or 14 years. I find the average waist measure of girls from 9 to 12 years of age to be 23.5. I have in some instances found the waist measure in girls of 12 to be 26 inches. The rational answer to this question is the fact that about this age the constricting influence of tight bands, corset waists, or corsets begins. The fashionable dressmaker insists that the young lady's figure must be "*formed*," and so as she develops, she grows into a mould like a cucumber in a bottle. And thus it happens that we find the civilised woman with a waist disproportionately small, as we find, among the aristocratic class of Chinese women, dwarfed and misshapen feet. The small-footed woman of China, in consequence of her deformity, is compelled to hobble about in a most ungraceful fashion, requiring usually one or more persons to sustain her in keeping her balance. She cannot run, skip, or dance as can her large-footed sisters. She is willing, however, to endure the inconveniences of being a cripple and the loss of the use of her feet and legs rather than forego the pleasure of being in fashion. If the sacrifices which the civilised woman makes to fashion were no greater, there would be comparatively small ground for complaint, but the constant girding of the waist results in mischiefs of vastly greater magnitude than those which the Chinese woman inflicts upon herself.

As the flat-headed woman watches with interest and growing pride the progressive depression of her infant's skull, while from day to day she binds more tightly upon it the flattened disc of wood; and as the Chinese woman glories in the shrivelled and misshaped stump of what was once her child's foot, as a develop-

ing mark of aristocratic gentility, in like manner does the civilised mother pride herself on the smallness and roundness of her daughter's corset-deformed waist, disregarding alike the suggestions of art, the warnings of science, and the admonitions which nature gives in the discomfort and distress occasioned by the effort to secure a change in the natural contour of the human form which is more monstrous in its violation of the laws of beauty, more widely at variance with the dictates of reason, and more disastrous in its consequences to bodily health and vigour, than any similar barbarity practised upon themselves or their children by the members of any savage or semi-savage tribe. How such a disfigurement of the physique could ever have come to be considered desirable or beautiful, is a problem hard to solve, since it involves not only an enormous loss of strength and vigour, but a violation of all the relevant precepts and principles of art which have been handed down to us by the great masters, as well as rules of hygiene in which all medical men of every age agree.

I may ask further, How does it happen that the waist of the average girl of 9 or 12 years measures 23.5 inches, while the waist of the young woman of from 18 to 30 years who has worn corsets or tight bands for a number of years, is only 23.3 inches? Why should the waist *decrease* in size with age while every other bodily dimension *increases*?

Still another question of interest arises from the fact to which almost every woman can testify, that the waist of the average woman accustomed to constriction from clothing, increases in measure whenever it has an opportunity for development, as when the common mode of dress is exchanged for a more healthful one, or ordinary clothing laid aside for a few weeks, as during confinement to bed from illness. Probably few women will question the fact that the waist is made smaller by constriction of the corset and tight bands. A lady said to one of my Nurses, when she learned of her healthful mode of dress: "But how do you manage to keep your abdomen down?" The corset is worn with a deliberate purpose of modifying the form of the waist, which it does to the great damage of health and vigour. I have shown by careful measurements in some hundreds of cases, that the waist of an adult woman increases within a few months, under the influence of proper clothing and proper exercise, from one or two to six or seven inches.

Let me call your attention more directly to some of the important particulars in which the ordinary mode of dress among civilised women, especially constriction of the waist, results in physical injury. The chief of these are:—

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

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