

WORTHLESS MEN

every trouble imaginable

The environment alongside the river is hardly a healthy one, and the people do suffer a great many ailments, for they are most of them poor and eat badly and drink to excess and live ? to the pharmacist's mind ? insanitary, incontinent lives. They procreate without thought, without sense or restraint, and condemn their unwelcome and unfortunate offspring to years of malnourishment, and sometimes mistreatment, dressed often in rags and prone to coughs and colds in every season ? their noses invariably crusted, their sleeves used as handkerchiefs ? and not only colds but any number of other afflictions, for they are prone, in fact, to every trouble imaginable.

They come to him with ringworm and head lice, laryngitis, bronchitis, eczema and asthma, diarrhoea, constipation, biliousness and jaundice, carbuncles and boils, broken bones; all of these, but also much graver conditions, including measles, meningitis, whooping cough, typhus, influenza, diphtheria, scarlet fever, tuberculosis, the rest.

He has nostrums for most of these things; he does what he can for them, and does what he can for the mothers, whose notion of their own good health is so often no more than the gap between illnesses, or merely the illness that is supportable ? that doesn't obstruct them from getting through the chores that must be got through in a day ? and among his particular skills, he believes, is never to allow a female customer to feel she is making a fuss about nothing, and if she appears shy of referring to certain parts of her body, then he is able to supply the words for her, often euphemistically, often going some way around the houses, but in the end arriving at an understanding.

He is most adept at disguising his impatience ? and sometimes distaste, even disgust ? and has as a consequence become especially well known for his sympathetic understanding (or so he hopes it must appear to them) of female infirmities, the list of which is unending: the discharges and vague, unspecified discomforts, the backaches and headaches so frequent they are accepted almost as normal, the constipation and haemorrhoids, flatulence and heartburn, the missed, heavy or irregular menses, the kidney and bladder infections, cystitis, nephritis, rheumatism, arthritis, weight gain and weight loss, gallstones and gout, mastitis,

tonsillitis, eyestrain and toothache, palpitations, phlebitis, ulcerative legs, hot flushes, water retention, and the general weariness and depression of the spirits that are so common among them (and no wonder).

In pregnancy especially the women will come to him, anaemic and listless, undernourished and unable to discharge their bowels, plagued by aches and pains of every description, their legs ropey with varicose veins, ankles puffy with fluid, and some of them so poor ? or so self-neglectful, or so lacking in the maternal instinct, or so bone-tired of maternity ? that they will suffer a diet of bread and tea throughout their pregnancies and thus give birth to weak and underweight babies with no chance in life but to die young (or to live, which is worse, as burdensome invalids).

After which many of the mothers will present the ailments that are consequent upon childbirth, the prolapses and tears and persisting anaemia, the constipation that can't be remedied as long as they haven't the time to establish the habit, and above all the insomnia and related physical and nervous exhaustion, their beds being shared not merely with husbands (who are frequently drunk, if they haven't yet enlisted or been conscripted) but with various of their other children, including the nursing, colicky infants who were so recently born there, all of them huddled beneath inadequate coverings in damp, unaired rooms that are rarely quiet, the walls being so thin and the neighbourhoods so very noisy.

No wonder, then, that the women (and sometimes their husbands) should also come to him in the hope of relief from the burden of childbearing, whether before or after the fact of conception.

bone-headed and dangerous

Elsewhere in the county, no doubt, there will be pharmacists as obliging as Dobson in the matter of contra-conceptives, and possibly some among them will be guided by their intellectual convictions, but most to his certain knowledge are reluctant to stock such devices, or else place so many conditions upon their availability that few will have the courage to submit to the interrogation that must accompany their sale (or will be forced to approach the subject so tangentially that the pharmacist will have the excuse he requires to misunderstand them), while others among his rivals

are steadfastly opposed to their provision whatever the circumstance, refusing to countenance the supply of any aid to the avoidance of unwanted children ? or, indeed, of venereal disease ? on the grounds that availability can serve only to encourage immorality and sexual incontinence; in other words, there remain those who believe that restraint is not only laudable but possible, even now, in 1916, and Britain in the midst of a war, and even here, among the poor, in a neighbourhood such as Riverside Road.

Which is a view that Dobson considers quite whimsical, or worse: bone-headed and dangerous.

At one time he thought differently, when he was not so wise as to the nature of his neighbours, when it was also his policy to ration the provision of contra-conceptives, confining their sale to married women above a certain age who had already borne children, in the belief that women lacked a sexual appetite and possessed a greater natural modesty than men, and so would never come to him out of any low motive but only because they were subject to the dominating desires of their husbands and required some protection from the perpetual burden of carrying and caring for babies.

But his years of proximity to the poor of Riverside Road have persuaded him that most are the product of a genetic inheritance that guarantees their moral debility ? their susceptibility not only to idleness and criminality but to promiscuity ? and while he accepts that there may be some possibility of probity and decency among the best of them, the fact is that most have been raised in an atmosphere lacking moral oxygen, the offspring of successive generations of intemperate parents, and there is no hope for them.

There is nothing to work on, and if their kind is not to be promulgated then the only strategy is to concede to the urgency and inevitability of their appetites, to allow them to satisfy their hungers, but meanwhile to prevent there being any addition to their numbers through the ready supply of prophylactics.

Certainly, it now appears to him, the old ideals of sexual chastity and self-control cannot possibly hold when there are so many more opportunities for fraternisation between the sexes, and such a fever among young women in particular for the passions of the moment ? life seeming so cheap and the lives of soldiers so readily

wasted ? and all of this allied to such a persistence of ignorance as to the mechanics of the thing, for despite their upbringing in overpopulated homes, surrounded by babies and mothers about to give birth, it seems that most young people still know little or nothing of how these babies are made, or of how they are got out (the belly-button being the commonest surmise), let alone of how to prevent their conception.

The situation is a sorry one. And while the absence of so many men has resulted in there being less drunkenness on the streets, and fewer assaults, fewer accidents, and has meant that their children are better fed, better clothed, and in better health as a consequence of their mothers' additional earnings and the curtailment of their fathers' profligacy, the lifting of the controlling hand of the father has allowed the children an excess of liberty, the younger ones running to mischief, and even to hooliganism, while the older ones seek opportunities to answer the appeals of their appetites, and Dobson fears for them; he fears for the daughters especially.

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