

CHAPTER IX

CONTINENCE — IS IT PRACTICABLE OR DESIRABLE?

THOUSANDS of well intentioned people who agree that there are times and conditions under which it is woman's highest duty to avoid having children advocate continence as the one permissible means of birth control. Few of these people agree with one another however, as to what continence is. Some have in mind absolute continence. Others urge continence for periods varying from a few weeks to many years. Still others are thinking of *Karezza*, or male continence as it is sometimes called.

The majority of physicians and sex psychologists hold that the practice of absolute continence is for the greater part of the human race, an absurdity. Were such continence to be practiced there is no doubt that it would be a most effective check upon the birth rate. It is seldom practiced however and when ad

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hered to under compulsion the usual result is injury to the nervous system and to the general health. Among healthy persons, this method is practicable only with those who have a degree of mentally controlled development as yet neither often experienced nor even imagined by the mass of humanity.

Absolute continence was the ideal of the early Christian church for all of its communicants, as shall be seen in another chapter. We shall also see how the church abandoned this standard and now confines the doctrine of celibacy to the unmarried, to the priesthood and the nuns.

Celibacy has been practiced in all ages by a few artists, propagandists and revolutionists in order that their minds may be single to the work which has claimed their lives and all the forces of their beings may be bent in one direction. Sometimes, too, such persons have remained celibate to avoid the burden of caring for a family.

The Rev. Dr. Thomas Robert Malthus, who in 1798 issued the first of those works which exemplified what is called the Malthusian doctrine, also advocated celibacy or absolute con-

tinence until middle age Malthus propounded the now widely recognized principle that population tends to increase faster than the food supply and that unlimited reproduction brings poverty and many other evils upon a nation His theological training naturally inclined him to favor continence—not so much from its practicability, perhaps as because he believed that it was the only possible method

We would be ignoring a vital truth if we failed to recognize the fact that there are individuals who through absorption in religious zeal, consecration to a cause, or devotion to creative work are able to live for years or for a lifetime a celibate existence It is doubtless true that the number of those who are thus able to transmute their sex forces into other creative forms is increasing It is not with these however, that we are concerned Rather it is with the mass of humanity who practice continence under some sort of compulsion

What is the result of forcing continence upon those who are not fitted or do not desire to practice it? The majority opinion of medical science and the evidence of statistics are

united on this point Enforced continence is injurious — often highly so

Physiology, writes Dr J Rutgers in *Rassenverbesserung* teaches that every function gains in power and efficiency through a certain degree of control, but that the too extended suppression of a desire gives rise to pathological disturbances and in time cripples the function Especially in the case of women may the damage entailed by too long continued sexual abstinence bring about deep disturbances

All this, be it understood, refers to persons of mature age For young men and women under certain ages, statistics and the preponderance of medical opinion agree that continence is highly advisable, in many cases seemingly altogether necessary to future happiness The famous Dr Bertillon of France, inventor of the Bertillon system of measurements for the human body has made, perhaps, the most exhaustive of all studies in this direction He demonstrates a large mortality for the boy who marries before his twentieth year When single, the mortality of French youths averages only 14 per thousand among married

youths it rises to 100 per thousand Which shows that it is six or eight times more perilous for a youth to be incontinent than continent up to that age Dr Bertillon's conclusions are that men should marry between their twenty-fifth and thirtieth years and that women should marry when they have passed twenty With the single exception of young men and women below the ages noted, Dr Bertillon's statistics tell a very different story And where it relates to celibates, it is a shocking one

"Dr Bertillon shows that in France, Belgium and Holland married men live considerably longer than single ones,' writes Dr Charles R Drysdale, in summing up the matter in *The Population Question* 'and are much less subject to becoming insane, criminal or vicious' From the same studies we learn that the conjugal state is also more favorable to the health of the woman over twenty years of age in the three countries covered

An analysis of criminal records showed that more than twice as many unmarried men and women had been held for crimes of all kinds than married persons Rates based upon 10,000 cases of insanity among men and

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women in the same countries showed 3.95 per thousand for male celibates against 2.17 for married men. For single women the rate was 3.4 against but 1.9 for married women. Insanity was reduced one half among women by marriage.

More startling still is the evidence of the mortality statistics. Bertillon found that the death rates of bachelors and widowers averaged from nearly two to nearly three times as high as those of married men of the same ages. Dr. Mayer, in his *Rapports Conjugaux* showed that the death rates among the celibate religious orders studied were nearly twice as high as those of the laity.

Can anyone knowing the facts ask that we recommend continence as a birth-control measure?

Virtually all of the dangers to health involved in absolute continence are involved also in the practice of continence broken only when it is desired to bring a child into the world. In the opinion of some medical authorities it is even worse because of the almost constant excitation of unsatisfied sex desire by the presence of the mate. People who think that they

believe in this sort of family limitation have much to say about self control. Usually they will admit that to abstain from all but a single act of sexual intercourse each year is an indication of high powers of self restraint. Yet that one act, performed only once a year, might be sufficient to keep a woman with one child in her womb and another at her breast during her entire childbearing period. That would mean from eighteen to twenty four children for each mother, provided she survived so many births and lactations. Contraceptives are quite as necessary to these self controlled ones who do not desire children every year as to those who lead normal, happy love lives.

) From the necessity of contraceptives and from the dangers of this limited continence certain persons are, of course, relieved. They are the ones whose mental and spiritual development is so high as to make this practice natural to them. These individuals are so exceedingly rare however that they need not be discussed here. Moreover they are capable of solving their own problems.

Few who advocate the doctrine of absolute

continence live up to it strictly I met one woman who assured me that she had observed it faithfully in the thirteen years since her youngest child was born She had, such a loathing for sexual union, however, that it was doubtless the easiest and best thing for her to do

Loathing disgust or indifference to the sex relationship nearly always lies behind the advocacy to continence except for the conscious purpose of creating children In other words while one in ten thousand persons may find full play for a diverted and transmuted sex force in other creative functions, the rest avoid the sex union from repression These are two widely different situations — one may make for racial progress and the happiness of the few individuals capable of it the other poisons the race at its fountain and brings nothing but the discontent unhappiness and misery which follow enforced continence For all that an increasing number of persons, mostly women are advocating continence within marriage

Sexual union is nearly always spoken of by such persons as something in itself repugnant

disgusting, low and lustful. Consciously or unconsciously they look upon it as a hardship, to be endured only, to bring God's image and likeness into the world. Their very attitude precludes any great probability that their progeny will possess an abundance of such qualities.

Much of the responsibility for this feeling upon the part of many thousands of women must be laid to two thousand years of Christian teaching that all sex expression is unclean. Part of it too must be laid to the dominant male's habit of violating the love rights of his mate.

The habit referred to grows out of the assumed and legalized right of the husband to have sexual satisfaction at any time he desires, regardless of the woman's repugnance for it. The law of the state upholds him in this regard. A husband need not support his wife if she refuses to comply with his sexual demands.

Of the two groups of women who regard physical union either with disgust and loathing or with indifference the former are the less numerous. Nevertheless there are many

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thousands of them I have listened to their stories often both as a nurse in obstetrical cases and as a propagandist for birth control. An almost universal cause of their attitude is a sad lack of understanding of the great beauties of the normal idealistic love act. Neither do they understand the uplifting power of such unions for both men and women. Ignorance of life, ignorance of all but the sheer reproductive function of mating, and especially a wrong training are most largely responsible for this tragic state of affairs. When this ignorance extends to the man in such a degree as to permit him to have the all too frequent coarse and brutal attitude toward sex matters the tragedy is only deepened.

Truly the church and those 'moralists' who have been insisting upon keeping sex matters in the dark have a huge list of concealed crimes to answer for. The right kind of a book, a series of clear, scientific lectures, or a common sense talk with either the man or woman will often do away with most of the repugnance to physical union. When the repugnance is gone the way is open to that

upliftment through sex idealism which is the birthright of all women and men

When I have had the confidence of women indifferent to physical union I have found the fault usually lay with the husband His idea of marriage is too often that of providing a home for a female who would in turn provide for his physical needs including sexual satisfaction Such a husband usually excludes such satisfaction from the category of the wife's needs physical or spiritual

This man is not concerned with his wife's sex urge save as it responds to his own at times of his choosing Man's code has taught woman to be quite ashamed of such desires Usually she speaks of indifference without regret often proudly She seems to regard herself as more chaste and highly endowed in purity than other women who confess to feeling physical attraction toward their husbands She also secretly considers herself far superior to the husband who makes no concealment of his desire toward her Nevertheless because of this desire upon the husband's part she goes on 'pretending' to mutual interest in the relationship

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Only the truth, plainly spoken can help these people. The woman is condemned to physical, mental and spiritual misery by the ignorance which society has fixed upon her. She has her choice between an enforced continence with its health wrecking consequences and its constant aggravation of domestic discord, and the sort of prostitution legalized by the marriage ceremony. The man may choose between enforced continence and its effects or he may resort to an unmarried relationship or to prostitution. Neither of these people — the one schooled directly or indirectly by the church and the other trained in the sex ethics of the gutter — can hope to lift the other to the regenerating influences of a pure, clean, happy love life. As long as we leave sex education to the gutter and houses of prostitution we shall have millions of just such miserable marriage failures.

Such continence as is involved in dependence upon the so called safe period for family limitation will harm no one. The difficulty here is that the method is not practical. It simply does not work. The woman who employs this method finds herself in the same pre-

dicament as the one who believes that she is not in danger of pregnancy when she does not respond passionately to her husband. That this woman is more likely to conceive than the emotional one is a well known fact. The woman who refuses to use contraceptives but who rejects sex expression except for a few days in the month is likely to learn too soon the fallacy of her theory as a birth control method.

For a long time the safe period was suggested by physicians. It was also the one method of birth control countenanced by the ecclesiastics. Women are learning from experience and specialists are discovering by investigation that the safe period is any thing but safe for all women. Some women are never free from the possibility of conception from puberty to the menopause. Others seemingly have safe periods for a time only, to become pregnant when they have begun to feel secure in their theory. Here again continence must give way as a method of birth control to contraceptives.

In the same category as the safe period, as a method of birth control must be placed

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so called male continence The same practice is also variously known as Karezza Sedular Absorption and Zugassent's Discovery Those who regard it as a method of family limitation are likely to find themselves disappointed

As a form of continence however if it can be called continence it is asserted to bring none of the long course of evils which too often follow the practice of lifelong abstinence or abstinence broken only when a child is desired Its devotees testify that they avoid ill effects and achieve the highest possible results These results are due probably to two factors

First those who practice Karezza are usually of a high mental and spiritual development and are therefore, capable of an exalted degree of self control without actual repression Second they have the benefit of that magnetic interchange between man and woman which makes for physical mental and spiritual wellbeing This stimulation becomes destructive irritation in ordinary forms of continence

The Oneida Community, a religious group comprising about 130 men and 150 women,

which occupied a part of an old Indian reservation in the state of New York were the chief exponents of male continence. The practice was a religious requirement with them and they laid great stress upon three different functions which they attributed to the sexual organs. They held that these functions were urinary, reproductive and amative each separate and distinct in its use from the others. Cases are cited in which both men and women are said to have preserved their youth and their sexual powers to a ripe old age and to have prolonged their honeymoons throughout married life. The theory however, interesting as it may be when considered as continence, is not to be relied upon as a method of birth control.

Summing it all up then continence may meet the needs of a few natures but it does not meet the needs of the masses. To enforce continence upon those whose natures do not demand it is an injustice the cruelty and the danger of which has been underestimated rather than exaggerated. It matters not whether this wrong is committed by the church, through some outworn dogma by the state,

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through the laws prohibiting contraceptives, or by society, through the conditions which prevent marriage when young men and women reach the age at which they have need of marriage

The world has been governed too long by repression. The more fundamental the force that is repressed the more destructive its action. The disastrous effects of repressing the sex force are written plainly in the health rates, the mortality statistics, the records of crime and the entry books of the hospitals for the insane. Yet this is not all the tale for there are still the little understood hosts of sexually abnormal people and the monotonous misery of millions who do not die early nor end violently but who are nevertheless, devoid of the joys of a natural love life.

As a means of both control and continence is as impracticable for most people as it is undesirable. Celibate women doubtless have their place in the regeneration of the world, but it is not they after all who will, through experience and understanding recreate it. It is mainly through fullness of expression and experience in life that the mass of women having

attained freedom will accomplish this unparal-
leled task

The need of women's lives is not repression but the greatest possible expression and fulfillment of their desires upon the highest possible plane. They cannot reach higher planes through ignorance and compulsion. They can attain them only through knowledge and the cultivation of a higher, happier attitude toward sex. Sex life must be stripped of its fear. This is one of the great functions of contraceptives. That which is enshrouded in fear becomes morbid. That which is morbid cannot be really beautiful.

A true understanding of every phase of the love life and such an understanding alone can reveal it in its purity — in its power of upliftment. Force and fear have failed from the beginning of time. Their fruits are wrecks and wretchedness. Knowledge and freedom to choose or reject the sexual embrace, according as it is lovely or unlovely and these alone can solve the problem. These alone make possible between man and woman that indissoluble tie and mutual passion and common understanding in which lies the hope of a higher race.