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The Case for Chastity

By

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In preparation for over a year, the following article is based on extended research and interviews and on data supplied by doctors, psychologists and others who deal daily with difficulties arising from sex conduct. It may be said, therefore, to represent not only the author's own considered opinion, but also the best informed opinion of the day. Mrs. Banning, mother of four children, is widely known for her numerous articles on problems of youth, marriage and the family.

IF THERE IS a case for chastity, it should be stated. Religion and obedience to moral codes still settle the question for many. But the increasing secularization of thought and the frequent denial that any moral issue is involved in sex conduct leaves uncounted thousands of young people today supposedly free to "make up their own minds," if such a

phrase can be used concerning conduct which is nearly always the result of runaway emotion.

They make up their minds with insufficient knowledge and without hearing the full argument. They are told that "everyone does it" and that unchastity or even promiscuity "doesn't make any difference any more." Thus misled, they may proceed to action which will almost surely have a permanent effect on the life of any girl involved and which in most cases alters her psychology as well as her physiology.

There are parked and lightless cars on side roads everywhere. There is a "couple trade" at tourist cabins which cater to a few hours of intimate occupancy. The dean of a coeducational university said to me that almost every hotel in the city adjoining

the campus was open to boys who wanted to take girls to them for the night. From 1100 questionnaires sent to college students, 200 to post-college students, and from 300 interviews,* it seems plainly apparent that there remain few taboos about sex in the college groups, and that while some girls prefer to wait until marriage, they are not shocked by the sex experience of their friends. And we know that there are 50,000 unmarried mothers registered yearly in the United States; that through wealth and influence many unmarried mothers are not registered; that many couples marry after pregnancy is discovered; and that birth control and abortions prevent motherhood in most illicit affairs.

Nevertheless, we must remember that unchastity, common though it may be, is not the norm. That still is chastity. Society does not approve nor is it set up for the general practice of unchastity. Every adult must know, as I do, many young girls who are not troubled by this problem, and others whose lives offer no opportunity for it. They keep regular hours. They are preoccupied with study, sports, domestic tasks and wholesome social activities.

Yet they cannot but hear, and hence we adults cannot ignore,

* A survey by Dorothy Dunbar Bromley and Florence Haxton Britten, published in *Redbook* and to appear in book form.

the widespread whispering campaign that is now condoning unchastity and even advocating premarital relations. So there is sound reason for going right after the facts and unveiling a few that may still be shrouded even in a period of frankness. Some parents believe that the subject should not be given publicity, lest argument increase undue curiosity or foster morbid interests. But it is secret rather than open discussion which creates morbidity; and, what is more, young people are increasingly frank among themselves, and adult silence only serves further to separate generations which are already quite far enough apart in matters of advice and sympathy.

Boys urging sex experience often say, "Why not?" and treat it as a matter of light concern. But it is revealing that no reputable physician who has handled thousands of cases and thousands of confidences is equally casual. No psychologist who has seriously investigated the problems of sexual relations outside of marriage treats them as trivial. That conscience and emotion will make the final decision in each case is obvious. But the personal and social consequences of unchastity, as they are apparent to those in a position to know, ought to be matters of public information.

First of all, there are the facts about venereal disease and abor-

tion. The American Social Hygiene Association estimates that five percent of the American people have syphilis and ten percent have gonorrhea. The highest attack rate for syphilis occurs during the early adult years, 16 to 30. If venereal disease is ultimately stamped out, one risk of unchastity will be destroyed. But we are a long way from that yet. In the meantime, there is a serious and constant danger of disease in premarital relations because a girl does not go freely to her doctor for advice.

Some information comes her way — a great deal of it wrong. She is apt to believe she is safe from conception because of certain contraceptives. Here is a comment on that by Dr. Hannah Stone, Medical Director of Margaret Sanger's birth control clinic in New York:

The best concerns offer absolutely unreliable contraceptives. A firm enjoying the respect of the medical profession advertises a vaginal jelly that is only about 60 percent safe. Suppositories on the market are between 40 and 50 percent safe. The strongest douche is successful about 10 percent of the time. The situation is further complicated by the fact that different women are susceptible to different contraceptives.

This is borne out by Dr. Maurice Bigelow, director of the Institute of Practical Science Research.

His institute tested hundreds of rubber condoms bought from a reliable manufacturer and discarded 25 out of every 100 as being imperfect. The equipments involving chemicals lose their effectiveness unless perfectly fresh. In other words, "You're perfectly safe" is not only an ugly and abnormal statement but it happens to be untrue. The conditions commonly surrounding acts of unchastity make it doubly untrue.

Figures show beyond a doubt that a tremendous number of unmarried young women go to abortionists. No doubt many of them have heard the current claptrap about an abortion being nothing at all to endure. Let them also hear this: Ten thousand girls and women lose their lives each year at the hands of abortionists. Dr. Frederick J. Taussig says:

The risk of infection is approximately ten times greater than at ordinary childbirth for the reason that the uterine cavity must be invaded, while in childbirth this is rarely the case. Also, for every woman who dies as a result of abortion, several women are disabled, sometimes permanently, or rendered sterile, or, at a subsequent pregnancy, suffer from the aftereffects of the abortion.

The medical point of view is not the only aspect to consider. The psychological effects of abortion are equally serious. Girls often

suffer horror for the rest of their lives, as well as increasing grief for the lost child. An abortion may injure not only the woman's health but also her emotional outlook. In hours of childbirth a woman often resents the results of her sex experience. But later she has the child to make up for the pain, and she has the protection of her husband and the respect of the community. The unmarried girl who goes to an abortionist has the resentment but neither the child nor a husband's protection to balance what may easily grow into hate of a man she loved, or perhaps dread of sex relations in a subsequent marriage.

These dangers — disease, abortion, emotional disasters, and even death — surround every premartial relation. But many people run the risks and escape. If the girl does escape, is there still no case for chastity? The argument for it certainly is not sound or effective if it rests only upon the fear of consequences. Dr. Thomas Parran, Surgeon General of the United States, says, "I have always hoped that we could divest our social hygiene program from the fear motive. If gonorrhoea and syphilis were unknown diseases, the ideal of monogamous sex relationship should, and I believe would, still stand upon its own intrinsic merits."

What, then, are these intrinsic values that make the case for

chastity? Here is the conclusion of one young woman who went through an extra-marital experience:

Much is talked of the evils of frustration in the case of the woman who denies herself the physical expression of love. In my opinion that vague and generally periodic torment is as nothing compared to the frustration suffered by the woman who seeks happiness in love outside of marriage. With all the latent instincts of her sex released and intensified by the mating experience, awake for the first time in her life to the full design of married love, she realizes with a sense of dumb defeat that for her the fulfillment of that design must remain, perhaps forever, an unaccomplished thing. It is a trapped, blind-alley feeling that only one who has experienced it can appreciate. The conflict set up as a result casts its dark shadow over an experience which one had expected to be all light and freedom.

There is far more to be said. Early and casual sex experience often inhibits and spoils mature experience. "Coming too soon," writes L. S. Hollingsworth in his *Psychology of the Adolescent*, "it may block maturity by putting the emphasis on physical release" — as against the mature satisfaction which includes mental and esthetic elements. There are plenty of girls who pride themselves on never "going any farther than petting" without any idea of how

disastrously far they have already gone. The dean of a woman's college, after considerable research, states that petting is apt to create habits which give a semblance of satisfaction without intercourse and so unsuit a girl emotionally for marriage. One authority has declared flatly that petting is far more dangerous than the complete sex act, for it can ruin normal sex experience. Following many consultations, a psychologist of the Y.W.C.A. says that substitute satisfactions tend to make intercourse an anti-climax. Over-stimulated and wrongly stimulated, girls who have indulged in petting find it difficult to respond to normal sex relations, and their chances of satisfaction and compatibility in marriage are very poor indeed.

The question of where to stop is not easy to answer. But any girl can differentiate between the romantic embrace which is a natural expression of young love and experiments in sexual sensation. She can differentiate, that is, as long as she is reacting normally, and here one cannot possibly ignore the influence of drinking. Alcohol inflames the senses, is an acknowledged aphrodisiac in most cases. A girl who has been drinking, and especially the girl who is not used to drinking, cannot possibly stand guard over her judgment or her conduct. And even if she keeps command of herself and

"knows what she is doing," I doubt if she knows that doctors and psychologists think that by petting she may be doing herself a possibly permanent injury.

And if the girl goes, as they say, "all the way," what does she confront? Each girl's chastity is the interweaving of her moral code, her nervous system, her physical being, and her mind. Does she realize how profoundly that interwoven fabric may be altered in a few yielding moments?

In the breaking down of chastity, her moral code is often violated. True, she may think she has none. Yet the great weight of tradition and poetry and romance is pressing on her, even if she is without a belief in orthodox religion. Hence many girls cannot but carry with them into early sexual experience a sense of sin which they never lose. This "guilt sense" is spoken of by almost all the doctors who have investigated such things. Even without a sense of actual sin against religion, the "guilt sense" persists in a large majority of cases.

The girl who thus feels that she is doing wrong suffers shockingly. The wound in her conscience may heal and harden and make her into a liar, or it may never heal so that she will go about with an actual fear of punishment and retribution. Often she confuses her sexual disappointments with the punishment due to sin.

On the other hand, there are girls who have really cast off conventions — who feel no spiritual or moral connection with their sex conduct. How do they come out? Usually they are deserted. If a woman has this point of view, she almost always believes — and says so once too often — that she can look out for herself. In many cases that is what her lover ultimately allows her to do. And then she becomes an outlaw. Society provides no protection for her. She may have the bravado of the outlaw, but she also has his loneliness.

One authority points out that there is growing up a large body of women who, because they were deserted by their first lover, or have found emotional release without the responsibility of marriage, are remaining unmarried and childless. This group is not only dangerous to other marriages but tragic in itself. Many are intellectual, healthy people who should be reproducing themselves instead of leading one-sided, uncreative lives.

So though people may say that morality is no longer involved in this question, I think they talk nonsense. Unchastity does affect the moral system, if only to set a girl's hand against society. Many girls fancy themselves in that rôle, rebels against a social system they consider stuffy, and religions they consider obsolete. But these

girls do not know what they combat, what protections they will strip from their future life, and what a weight of experience and history is against them.

The effect of unchastity on the nervous system is as serious. Being clandestine, it is rarely either well housed or comfortable. It lodges but does not live. Think of the wayside cabins, the cheap hotels, the back seats of cars, as an environment for what we call love. Hurried, watchful, fearful of interruption or discovery — these are inevitable descriptions of unchastity.

On this point it is hard to find any more competent conclusions than those of Dr. Oliver M. Butterfield, director of the Family Guidance Service in New York:

The sexual adjustment is not a simple thing to make under the best of conditions and when hampered by guilt and apprehension it is almost impossible. At a time when man and woman may need expert advice they are forced to hide their relationship. Because of this secrecy many things are likely to happen. If the woman is a virgin she may need medical attention before she can have intercourse. The sex act is not instinctive. Premarital relationships can build up, through ignorance, incorrect, unsatisfying behavior that must be painfully unlearned after marriage.

The ordinary situation of unchastity is the case, then, of an

apprehensive pair of people, in an uncongenial or uncomfortable environment, wondering if anyone has seen them. What harm such experiences do to the nervous systems of young girls, who are at such times under the added strain of great excitement, cannot be measured.

It is generally agreed that repressions are bad for almost everyone, and that argument is often given for indulgence in unchastity. But it works the other way too. Loudly as it may boast of its freedom, unchastity carries repression right along with it. There are places where it cannot go. The unchaste girl often lacks escort and open companionship. There are times when she may not speak to the one person she cares about. As long as passionate love or even excitement is growing and deeply shared, this may not matter. Secrecy is then a delicious privacy. But every recorded experience shows that such secrecy has the seeds of bitterness in it. The girl usually becomes resentful, hating to be hidden and unacknowledged, and yet more fearful of the discovery of her relation.

Of course, the couple may marry. But they still are cheating themselves. They enter on the responsibilities and adjustments of living together, take up the hard work that marriage is, without the delights and fresh discoveries which make those responsibilities

pleasurable and easy. Even with its natural rewards and emotional impetus, marriage is difficult enough. But if the end of romance has already been reached before a couple marry, they face its problems without the natural compensation for them. They are apt to be jealous, for each knows the other as an experimenter.

On the other hand, the relationship is more than likely to be broken off. Remember, it is with the immature that we are chiefly concerned—the young people who are thinking only of an immediate pleasure, an adventure. They have heard that youthful sex experiments may be casual, carefree and harmless. But have the girls who act on this heard also what the best medical and psychological authority has to say—that a first sex adventure can rarely be either casual or carefree to any normal girl? That it will not satisfy the mating instinct, but will only arouse it more powerfully, and fix it upon one individual? Most girls feel that there is a tie-up between sexual and spiritual experience, and associate sexual experience closely with the identity of the lover. But if the adventure is, as it very well may be, casual in fact to the boy in the case, who passes on to other conquests, the consequences to the girl can only be torments of jealousy, frustration and despair.

Such breaks and the resultant

sense of inferiority and pain often make a woman promiscuous. Not a voice of the slightest authority is raised for promiscuity. Doctors may and do differ in their vehemence as to what harm the premarital relation does, but as far as the harm of promiscuity is concerned, for either a woman or a man, they are completely agreed.

The promiscuous woman is usually in doubt of her own attractiveness and is seeking reassurance by repeated and varied experience with men. The fact of inferiority is also true of promiscuous men, who in such ways prove a virility which they secretly doubt. It is bad for a man who ultimately wants a happy home relation because he soon becomes neither romantic nor patient enough to give his wife satisfaction. Also, the promiscuous man or woman finds adjustment to monogamy almost impossible. An unchaste past is intrusive and a troublemaker. Sex loses charm, but the craving for satisfaction and the nervous search for it goes on. Promiscuity makes people lose the greatest experience in life — love.

It is all very well to say, "People look at these things differently today." They may look at them differently, but they feel about the same.

Jealousy, for example, is still very much alive. It is true that reason is having a quieting effect among well-bred people. But, on

the other hand, it is reason itself which often argues with a man that if his wife was unchaste before marriage, she has already destroyed certain inhibitions, which makes her more apt to be unfaithful. Psychologists say, too, that the promiscuous woman often suffers the most of all from jealousy.

Again, we cannot ignore man's preference for a virgin as wife. As to this we have the testimony of those who have built up records from cases. The preference is both modern and historic truth. Westermarck's *History of Marriage* bears testimony to that. Though boys of today may talk big and pretend to indifference, they still don't want the girl they love to have had previous possessors. So it is as true now as ever that in sacrificing chastity a girl may be gambling away her later chances of lifelong married happiness.

As a matter of fact, we have not so much that is new to add to what history teaches about sex. It is incorrect to say that we are reverting to savagery when sex conduct becomes lax. Among savage tribes, sex behavior was always subject to rules, though they were not like our own. What history very clearly reveals is that there have always been laws governing chastity. These are often the oldest primary laws, and infringement of them was subject to grave punishment because it presented complications of life

and excited angers and conflicts which were bitter.

Unless sexual relations are to become disintegrating, there is always a necessity of trust between the individuals concerned. Such trust is usually not sustained after the first height of passion has been reached and passed, unless it is connected with the religion or the philosophy of man or woman — whatever ties the person up to life itself. It is not sentimental but hard fact that sex relationship either has to be connected with a moral code which is self-sustaining (and this is very rare indeed), or it has to be based on a belief that sexual relations involve a duty to the race as well as to the individual. Olga Knopf puts the case plainly when she says that "sexual relations are not private affairs alone. They are the concern of the whole of society."

That is what young people, those who are still only curious and those who are already on the defensive, should be helped to understand. Without scolding, or without minimizing the rights of individual love, it ought to be shown that though the laws involving marriage may be evaded and broken, they do exist and penalties are still exacted for their infraction.

Now if you could make the young couple in the back of the car or in the tourist cabin believe

this in advance, nothing would be better. But how? The boy and girl are young, eager, and together. They have to be shown first of all that those who wish to control the mating instinct are by no means plotting against their attraction for each other, but against the influences that will do violence to their love — or what might in the end become love.

The thing to do is to help these young couples out, and, if their attraction is not casual, to encourage their marriage. As the authorities who were interviewed on this subject of chastity made their comments, the statement came again and again with repeated emphasis that the best solution was early marriage. This is not by any means synonymous with hasty marriage. But if a boy and a girl felt that they did not have to face an indefinite postponement of sex relations, their attitude would change. It is the hopelessness cast in their faces, the long gap between the awakening of their passion and its decently authorized expression which makes for rebellion against conventions and accepted rules.

We hear on all sides that economic conditions make early marriage difficult now. But it has never been very easy for young people to marry. Throughout history we see that parents have always had to help them out at the

start. And modern parents, say those who know best, should be ready to do likewise; should encourage early marriage. But they should also frankly state the case for premarital chastity.

For there is, as we have seen, such a case. Men have devised no way of protecting the unchaste woman, except in some cases from childbearing and disease. She is in danger of moral and psychological breakdown. Unchastity gives the richest experience in life the poorest and most ignoble surroundings. It checks and stunts the development of love. It breeds lonely women and selfish men.

Finally, normal young men and women do not want unchastity. They are searching for an ethic to guide them. College investigations show that students believe in fidelity, want marriage. They want an emotional life with vitality in it, one that will wear. The case for chastity does not need

much pleading before young people thus disposed. Given proper ideals, decent upbringing, half a chance, it is what girls and boys want.

Experts, doctors, psychologists and friends may advise. But they do not decide in the end. This is one of the social problems which is broken up into individual cases for decision. Out of this tangle of impulses, some of them inherited and some the product of immediate environment, the burden of the race as well as individual happiness is laid upon each boy and girl. The attitude toward chastity is as important a matter as may come to each one of them in a whole lifetime. That means that the effort of their elders should be to keep plainly before them all these scientific, spiritual and historical arguments for chastity which will strengthen their own normal resistance to the laxness they are aware of around them.

