

TO ABATE THE PLAGUE OF CITY NOISES.

BY JOHN H. GIRDNER, M.D.

IN an article on "The Plague of City Noises," published last year in the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, the writer called attention to the injurious and exhausting effects of city noises on the auditory apparatus, and on the whole nervous system of those obliged to live in a closely built and densely populated city. City noises were divided into six classes, and the fact was briefly noted that a large proportion of the noises in each of these classes were entirely unnecessary and ought to be suppressed in the interests of the health and comfort of the people. The formation of a society was suggested whose business it should be to make a systematic study of city noises, to point out those found unnecessary, and, by co-operating with the city authorities, to secure such legislation and enforcement of the same as would suppress them, and to endeavor in every way to create a sentiment in favor of the reduction of the din and confusion in our streets and houses.

The reception accorded to these views and suggestions by the press and public was a surprise. Hundreds of editorial comments were made on the article all over this country and in Europe, in both the lay and medical press, and scores of private letters were received from all sorts and conditions of people throughout the United States. Almost without exception the press everywhere, and especially the medical press, agreed with the contention that the noises of our modern cities are not only a source of great discomfort, but are largely life-shortening and health-wrecking in their effects, and that a vast number of the most annoying of them are entirely unnecessary and ought to be stopped. Letters of thanks for calling attention to this plague were received from sufferers, who urged the organization of the society which had

been suggested, and offered moral and material support if work should be continued in this line.

The discussion thus aroused has set people thinking on the subject, and has created a sentiment against noise which has already resulted in good. In fact, it may be truly said that a beginning has been made in the work of educating the people to have more regard for the public health and comfort in the matter of unnecessary noise. The Board of Aldermen of New York City passed an ordinance making it unlawful to haul iron or steel beams or rails through the streets of the city unless the same were so loaded as to prevent them from jarring against each other, and a fine of twenty-five dollars was the penalty for its violation. On May 6, 1897, the first arrest was made for violating this ordinance, and the magistrate promptly fined the prisoner twenty-five dollars. Since that day, one sees all beams and rails drawn through the streets wrapped at the ends with old carpet or burlap to deaden the sound. I mention this case to show how easily and effectually unnecessary noises can be abolished if the Aldermen will pass proper ordinances and the police will enforce them. The difficulty in the past has been that people have not appreciated the fact that the continual roar and din in which dwellers in large cities are obliged to live is essentially health-destroying. They have been painfully aware of the discomfort it causes, but they have not realized that city noises are irritating and exhausting to the whole nervous system, and that they are a potent factor in lowering the tone and resisting power of the human mechanism, and play an important part in producing neurasthenia or nervous prostration, and other affections of the brain and nervous system. It is not alone the purer air and change of scene, but also the peace and quiet, of the country that restore health and vigor to all, and especially to invalids and convalescents.

It is little more than a hundred years since the people and their law-makers fully appreciated the immense importance to the public health of thorough house and municipal sanitation. To-day, no care or expense is thought too great to provide proper sewerage, drainage, cleanliness, etc., in our towns and cities. Garbage, dead animals, etc., are not removed from the streets only because they are unsightly, and produce unpleasant odors, but because they are dangerous to health. We contend for the re-

duction of city noise on precisely the same grounds—not alone because it is a source of great discomfort, though that in itself would be sufficient cause, but because it menaces the general health. City legislation has been woefully inconsistent. For instance, it is unlawful for any person to conduct a business within the limits of New York City which sets free unpleasant odors. Glue factories, fat-rendering establishments, and all other industries which contaminate the air with foul odors, have been closed or driven from the city limits regardless of the pecuniary interests of their owners—not because unpleasant odors are, *per se*, detrimental to the public health, for they are not, but because such odors outrage one of the five senses, viz., that of smell. Yet practically nothing has been done to protect the sense of hearing against unnecessary and obnoxious sounds, which not only produce great discomfort, but are actually destructive to health. It is not contended that all noise can be suppressed, any more than that all unpleasant odors can be abolished. They are to a certain extent necessary evils of life in a large city. But if the same care and thought were exercised by city authorities to suppress and control the noise-makers as have been expended in suppressing and controlling the odor-makers, the health and comfort of city dwellers would be greatly improved.

Some have fallen into the error of supposing that noise means enterprise, and that the city or town which produces the greatest din in proportion to the number of its inhabitants must of necessity be most rapidly advancing in modern civilization. Whatever else advancing civilization may mean, it certainly means an ever-increasing respect on the part of each individual for the rights, health and comfort of all the others. Churches, hospitals, public and private charities, etc., should not be the only evidences of Christian civilization in our cities. The Kingdom of Heaven on earth is peace and quiet within, and this peace and quiet ought to be reflected in our method of conducting our daily occupations, and the business of our cities should be done with the least possible amount of noise and distraction.

In the best circumstances, city dwellers must always suffer in health and comfort from noise, just as they must always suffer from lack of the purest air, even under the best possible sanitary conditions. But any one who makes a careful study of city noises will be astonished at the very large number which are

wholly unnecessary, and the abolition of which would in no way interfere with the rights or business interests of those who make them. The noise-makers may be divided into two classes. The first and by far the larger class make unnecessary noise thoughtlessly. They have never had their attention called to the fact that they cause annoyance to others by making noises which are unnecessary; and education and the creation of a sentiment is all that is required to make them as careful to respect the rights and comfort of others in the matter of noise as they are in other respects. A personal experience illustrates what I mean. As I was riding in a street car recently, a respectable-looking young man sat beside me, and for twenty blocks he whistled a sharp, idle, inane whistle, which was manifestly annoying to half a dozen of his fellow-passengers. The car suddenly lurched round a curve, and his foot came lightly in contact with my own. He immediately turned, lifted his hat, bowed to me, and said, "I beg your pardon, sir," and went on whistling. This young man had learned from custom and habit that it is very bad manners not to apologize for even unintentionally jostling another person, but he had not learned that it is very unjust and unkind to others, and therefore bad manners, to torture them with unnecessary noise.

It may be said that the above is an unusual case, and that but few are so rude as to whistle in public places. Well, let us study the so-called fashionable set, those who are generally supposed to have attained to the high-water mark of æstheticism, refinement and all the graces of modern civilization. Go to a fashionable reception or afternoon tea if you want to hear unnecessary noise. My lady's drawing-room is a pandemonium of shouting women. You have no choice but to shout if you wish to converse on these occasions, and the success or failure of one of these functions seems to depend largely on the din which the guests are able to create. These are, however, private pandemoniums, and can be avoided. They only torture those who participate in them. Then even the church people contribute their quota. In these days of innumerable clocks and watches, the ringing of church bells in large cities is simply barbarous, and their painful and injurious effect on the sick and afflicted, the tired and weary, who cannot escape from them, is like anything but the neighborly service of the good Samaritan, who was so warmly commended

by that Master whose doctrine the churches exist to teach. Attention is called to these instances of unnecessary noise, to show that noise-makers belong to all classes, and that the so-called refined and religious are often as neglectful of the rights of others, in this respect, as the rude and uneducated.

The railroads of New York City are the greatest single source of noise in the streets in which they are operated, and for half a block on either side. The elevated road is the worst offender of all. Conversation in a street through which it runs is practically impossible, owing to the roar and rattle of the passing trains, and it seems impossible that any one should ever be able to sleep in a room anywhere near it. Sleep under such conditions cannot be obtained until the nervous system has become accustomed to this all-night roar. And here attention should be called to a mistaken notion held by some to the effect that because city dwellers have become accustomed to the roar and din which go on around them at all times, and because some of them are able to sleep in rooms adjacent to the elevated road or other din producer, noise is therefore not injurious to them. They have become accustomed to noise, it is true, but the habitual tippler has likewise become accustomed to alcohol, so that he can drink large amounts without showing signs of intoxication. But the noise in the one case, and the alcohol in the other, are certainly producing deleterious effects on the systems of their victims. In other words, it is injurious to sleep where a continuous succession of discordant sounds is poured in on the auditory apparatus.

When one considers the long list of those who have been maimed or killed outright by the cable and trolley cars in Greater New York, it seems almost puerile to complain of their clanging gongs, but as nerve irritators these hold a front rank. The useless bells which jingle from the collars of the horses drawing the horse cars are especially annoying to many persons. These bells were instituted when the space between the car-rails was not paved, and the horses' feet on the soft earth made no warning sound. Now, however, these spaces are all paved, and the clatter of the car horses is sufficient warning, just as the clatter of the horses' feet of private carriages and wagons is all that is necessary to warn pedestrians of their approach. These bells should be abolished.

There is another unnecessary noise connected with surface

cars which is not only annoying, but is an impertinence to passengers. I refer to the gong in each car, which the conductor is obliged to ring every time he is paid a fare. It is an outrage, after a passenger has paid his passage, to have his auditory apparatus irritated and transformed into a register for the car company, so as to be a spy or detective on the conductor.

Rubber gaskets properly placed under the rails of the elevated roads, and the substitution of electricity or compressed air for steam as a motive power, would greatly lessen the noise which these roads now make. But, in any event, the din created by the elevated and surface cars must always remain in the list of unnecessary noise. It can be entirely abolished by placing the roads under ground. Some idea of the relief to the auditory apparatus which would be experienced if the main car lines of the city were placed under ground can be had by recalling the enormous improvement in the appearance of the streets after the electric wires were placed in the subways and the unsightly poles were removed from the curbs. The network of wires and poles outraged our sense of sight, and the roaring, rattling car lines outrage our sense of hearing. There is this difference, however, that, while the poles and wires were annoying to the sense of sight, they were not detrimental to health, whereas the car lines at once offend the eye, inflict pain upon the ear, and, above all, through the noise they make impair the general health.

The second class of noise-makers seem to take a fiendish delight in creating as much din as possible. They go through quiet residential streets at all hours of the day and night, yelling and shouting, ringing bells and blowing horns, and in a thousand other ways needlessly disturbing the peace and quiet of the neighborhood; taking apparent pleasure in racking the feeble nerves of the sick and invalids, and destroying the sleep of tired and weary brains. Fines and imprisonment are the only means of teaching such people to respect the rights, health and comfort of others.

Horses and wheeled vehicles produce by far the greatest amount of the noise in city streets. Asphalt pavement in all streets is, therefore, a *sine qua non* in reducing noise. Wheels roll over this pavement in silence, except when they pass over an iron manhole cover, when a sudden, unexpected ear-splitting sound is sent forth which can be heard for two blocks, and in

residential streets, especially at night, is one of the most annoying of street sounds. This source of nerve-irritation is wholly unnecessary. If these manhole covers were made to fit their frames, and were then asphalted like the rest of the street, the pavement would be continuously smooth, and no sound would be emitted when a wheel passed over one of them. Rubber tires also greatly reduce the noise and rattle of carriages. I doubt, however, if any Alderman could be found with courage even to suggest an ordinance requiring that all carriages, of every kind, used on the streets of New York should have rubber tires. Yet the enforcement of such an ordinance would reduce street noise enormously, and would be very far from a hardship to the owners. For I am informed, by one of the leading city manufacturers of wagons and carriages, that rubber tires increase the life of a vehicle one-fourth, and reduce the cost of repairs one-half. In any event, the individual pecuniary loss such an ordinance would cause to this class of noise-makers would never approach that suffered by the odor-makers, whose factories were shut up within the city limits.

The sounds caused by the impact of horses' feet on the pavement seem destined to remain in the list of necessary noises until automobiles entirely supplant the horse. Horseless carriages and wagons, with rubber tires, on properly constructed asphalt pavements, are noiseless, and would be an ideal means of locomotion in city streets. The noise made by horses' feet is not, however, so irritating and painful as many other street sounds of less volume, for the reason that these sounds are produced at regular intervals as the animal walks or trots, and the ear becomes accustomed to their recurrence. All necessary noises are the more bearable because we know that in their making something useful is being accomplished. It is the unlooked-for and unnecessary sounds which do the greatest harm ; for to the actual nervous shock of the sufferer is added the irritating sense of a wrong done him.

What valid argument can be adduced to justify the continued existence of the innumerable cats which infest our streets and yards? That people will go on year after year having their sleep destroyed and their tempers perturbed by the nightly cat-erwaulings of these useless pests is beyond explanation.

There are the useless postman's whistle, the shouting pedlars

and hucksters, the yelling "rags and bottles" man, the horn-blowing scissor-grinder and four-in-hand driver, with scores of other noise-makers too numerous to mention, who keep up a continuous din of distracting, nerve-wrecking sounds in our residential streets, utterly regardless of the fact that they are causing pain, discomfort, and positive injury to sick and nervous women and children, who cannot escape the torment they cause. It would be no hardship or pecuniary loss to any of these people if they were compelled to conduct their business in a quiet, orderly manner. I have often felt the absurdity of giving the nurse orders to "keep the patient quiet, and the sick room free from noise," when the din from the street below made such a thing impossible.

My contention for less noise is based on the experience and observation of nearly twenty years' practice of my profession in New York City. And I am satisfied that the irritation caused by the din in which we live to-day is essentially health-destroying, and plays no unimportant part in producing disease of the brain and nervous system, and delaying the recovery of the sick. This question of noise is not confined to physical well-being; it is also one of morals. It is wrong to inflict needless pain and discomfort on others, no matter which one of the senses is made to convey the painful sensation. The plague is steadily getting worse. New York can grow only in one direction, and practically the same street space must be used for the daily activities of an ever-increasing population. Complaints and comments against useless noise by individuals will accomplish little. These are sporadic efforts, and their authors are lucky if they escape being called "cranks" by careless and indifferent officials. A careful study of this plague, and of the methods of abating it, is what is needed, and then a concerted effort to make the people's servants, the city officials, take such steps as will abate it. The idea is not to punish or persecute, though some examples are necessary, but to educate; for all classes are involved in this crime.

The very existence of a properly organized and properly conducted "Society for the Prevention of Noise" would be a constant reminder to the thoughtless, and a standing menace to the vicious, noise-makers, and would in time create a sentiment in favor of peace and quiet, and educate people to respect the rights of others in this matter, just as the Society for the Prevention of

Cruelty to Animals has taught all classes to abstain from unnecessary cruelty to the lower animals.

It would be extending the Golden Rule into a new field of social life. There is unquestionably a strong and wide-spread feeling against the noisy and distracting conditions under which we live at present, and an earnest desire on the part of a majority for improvement. But what is everybody's business is nobody's business. Some such organized effort by earnest men and women as I have suggested would serve to crystallize, concentrate and make effective the general desire for less noise.

JOHN H. GIRDNER.

PRESENT STATUS OF THE SILVER QUESTION.

BY THE HON. RICHARD P. BLAND.

For years past the gold standard advocates have proclaimed from time to time that the silver question would die out. This was the oft-repeated assurance before and after the Chicago Convention. Every effort was made to stamp out what they were pleased to call the "Silver Craze." But when State after State held its convention, especially in the Mississippi valley, and in the East and South, it was made manifest that the Democratic party would pronounce, in no uncertain way, in favor of the full restoration of the coinage of silver.

Upon the silver question the Chicago platform gave no uncertain sound. That was the paramount issue in the Presidential election last year. Upon that issue the Democratic party polled six and a half millions of votes. Notwithstanding this fact, it was repeated again and again, immediately after the election, that the end of the silver heresy had come. But wherever Democratic conventions have been held this year the Chicago platform has been endorsed. Indeed, the people are more active, if possible, in support of the free coinage of silver now than they have been heretofore. Recruits to the cause are being made every day. No more is the cause of silver dying out than are truth and justice dying out; as well make the proclamation that liberty is dying out, that patriotism is dying out, that sympathy for human poverty and suffering is dying out, or that the avenging hand of God is paralyzed.

The gold worshippers sit down in an imaginary graveyard, and in their dreams the spectres of millions of silver ghosts startle them from their reveries, and in their excitement they cry out, "The silver question is expiring!" But they never forget, meantime, like the boy in the story, "to keep up a constant