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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK SEX-LOVE, AND ITS PLACE IN A FREE SOCIETY ***

**SEX-LOVE,
AND ITS PLACE IN A FREE SOCIETY: (SECOND EDITION)
BY EDWARD CARPENTER.**

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SEX-LOVE

The subject of Sex is most difficult to deal with, not only on account of a certain prudery as well as a natural reticence on the subject, but doubtless also because the passion itself being so tremendously strong and occupying such a large part of human thought—and words being so scanty and inadequate on the subject—everything that *is* said is liable to be misunderstood; the most violent inferences are made, and equivocations surmised, from the simplest remarks; qualified admissions of liberty are interpreted into recommendations of unbridled licence; and generally the perspective of literary expression is turned upside down by the effect of the unfamiliarity of the topic on the reader's mind.

There is indeed a vast deal of fetishism in the current treatment of Sex; and the subject is dealt with as though it lay quite out of line with any other need or faculty of human nature. Nor can one altogether be surprised at this when one perceives of what vast import Sex is in the scheme of things, and how deeply it has been associated since the earliest times not only with man's personal impulses but even with his religious sentiments and ceremonials.

Next to hunger this is doubtless the most primitive and imperative of our needs. But in modern civilised life

Sex enters probably even more into *consciousness* than hunger. For the hunger-needs of the human race are in the later societies fairly well satisfied, but the sex-desires are strongly restrained, both by law and custom, from satisfaction—and so assert themselves all the more in thought.

To find the place of these desires, their utterance, their control, their personal import, their social import, is a tremendous problem to every youth and girl, man and woman.

There are a few of both sexes, doubtless, who hardly feel the passion—who have never been "in love," and who experience no strong sexual appetite—but these are rare. Practically the passion is a matter of universal experience; and speaking broadly and generally we may say it is a matter on which it is quite desirable that every adult at some time or other *should* have experience—actual and physical, as well as emotional. There may be exceptions; but, as said, the sex-instinct lies so deep and is so universal, that for the understanding of life—of one's own life, of that of others, and of human nature in general—as well as for the proper development of one's own capacities, such experience is almost indispensable.

And here in passing I would say that in the social life of the future this need will surely be recognised, and not only will young people be deliberately prepared and instructed for the fulfilment of Sex when their time comes, but (while there will be no stigma attaching to voluntary celibacy) the state of enforced celibacy in which vast numbers of women live to-day will be looked upon as a national wrong, almost as grievous as that of prostitution—of which latter evil indeed it is in some degree the counterpart or necessary accompaniment.

Of course Nature (personifying under this term the more unconscious, even though human, instincts and forces) takes pretty good care in her own way that most people should have sexual experience. She has her own purposes to work out, which in a sense have nothing to do with the individual—her racial purposes. But she acts in the rough, with tremendous sweep and power, and with little adjustment to or consideration for the later developed and more conscious and intelligent ideals of humanity. The youth, deeply infected with the sex-passion, suddenly finds himself in the presence of Titanic forces—the Titanic but sub-conscious forces of his own nature. "In love" he feels a superhuman strength—and rightly so, for he identifies himself with cosmic energies and entities, powers that are preparing the future of the race, and whose operations extend over vast regions of space and millennial lapses of time. He sees into the abysmal depths of his own being, and trembles with a kind of awe at the disclosure. And what he feels concerning himself he feels similarly concerning the one who has inspired his passion. The glances of the two lovers penetrate far beyond the surface, ages down into each other, waking a myriad antenatal dreams.

For the moment he lets himself go, rejoicing in the sense of limitless power beneath him—borne onwards like a man down rapids, too intoxicated with the glory of motion to think of whither he is going; then the next moment he discovers that he is being hurried into impossible situations—situations which his own moral conscience, as well as the moral conscience of Society, embodied in law and custom, will not admit. He finds perhaps that the satisfaction of his imperious impulse is, to all appearances, inconsistent with the welfare of her he loves. His own passion arises before him as a kind of rude giant which he or the race to which he belongs may, Frankenstein-like, have created ages back, but which he now has to dominate or be dominated by; and there declares itself in him the fiercest conflict—that between his far-back Titanic instinctive and sub-conscious nature, and his later developed, more especially human and moral self.

While the glory of Sex pervades and suffuses all Nature; while the flowers are rayed and starred out towards the sun in the very ecstasy of generation; while the nostrils of the animals dilate, and their forms become instinct, under the passion, with a proud and fiery beauty; while even the human lover is transformed, and in the great splendors of the mountains and the sky perceives something to which he had not the key before—yet it is curious that just here, in Man, we find the magic wand of Nature suddenly broken, and doubt and conflict and division entering in, where a kind of unconscious harmony had first prevailed.

Heine I think says somewhere that the man who loves unsuccessfully knows himself to be a god. It is not perhaps till the great current of sexual love is checked and brought into conflict with the other parts of his being that the whole nature of the man, sexual and moral, under the tremendous stress rises into consciousness and reveals in fire its god-like quality. This is the work of the artificer who makes immortal souls—who out of the natural love evolves even a more perfect love. "In tutti gli amanti," says Giordano Bruno, "é questo fabro vulcano" ("in all lovers is this Olympian blacksmith present").

It is the subject of this conflict, or at least differentiation, between the sexual and the more purely moral and social instincts in man which interests us here. It is clear, I think, that if sex is to be treated rationally, that is, neither superstitiously on the one hand nor licentiously on the other, we must be willing to admit that both the satisfaction of the passion and the non-satisfaction of it are desirable and beautiful. They both have their results, and man has to reap the fruits which belong to both experiences. May we not say that there is probably some sort of transmutation of essences continually effected and effectible in the human frame? Lust and Love—the *Aphrodite Pandemos* and the *Aphrodite Ouranios*—are subtly interchangeable. Perhaps the corporeal amatory instinct and the ethereal human yearning for personal union are really and in essence one thing, with diverse forms of manifestation. However that may be, it is pretty evident that there is some deep relationship between them. It is a matter of common experience that the unrestrained outlet of merely physical desire leaves the nature drained of its higher love-forces; while on the other hand if the physical satisfaction be denied the body becomes surcharged with waves of emotion—sometimes to an unhealthy and dangerous degree. Yet at times this emotional love may, by reason of its expression being checked or restricted, transform itself into the all-penetrating subtle influence of spiritual love.

Marcus Aurelius quotes a saying of Heraclitus to the effect that the death of earth is to become water (liquefaction), and the death of water is to become air (evaporation), and the death of air is to become fire (combustion). So in the human body are there sensual, emotional, spiritual, and other elements of which it may be said that their death on one plane means their transformation and new birth on other planes.

It will readily be seen that I am not arguing that the lower or more physical manifestations of love should be killed out in order to force the growth of the more spiritual and enduring forms—because Nature in her slow evolutions does not generally countenance such high and mighty methods; but am merely trying to indicate that there are grounds for believing in the transmutability of the various forms of the passion, and grounds for thinking that the sacrifice of a lower phase may sometimes be the only condition on which a higher and more durable phase can be attained; and that therefore Restraint (which is absolutely necessary at times) *has* its compensation.

Any one who has once realised how glorious a thing Love is in its essence, and how indestructible, will hardly need to call anything that leads to it a sacrifice; and he is indeed a master of life who accepting the grosser desires as they come to his body, and not refusing them, knows how to transform them at will into the most rare and fragrant flowers of human emotion.

Until these subjects are openly put before children and young people with some degree of intelligent and sympathetic handling, it can scarcely be expected that anything but the utmost confusion, in mind and in morals, should reign in matters of Sex. That we should leave our children to pick up their information about the most sacred, the most profound and vital, of all human functions, from the mere gutter, and learn to know it first from the lips of ignorance and vice, seems almost incredible, and certainly indicates the deeply-rooted unbelief and uncleanness of our own thoughts. Yet a child at the age of puberty, with the unfolding of its far-down emotional and sexual nature, is eminently capable of the most sensitive, affectional, and serene appreciation of what Sex means (generally more so, as things are to-day, than its worldling parent or guardian); and can absorb the teaching, if sympathetically given, without any shock or disturbance to its sense of shame—that sense which is so natural and valuable a safeguard of early youth.

To teach the child first, quite openly, its physical relation to its own mother, its long indwelling in her body, and the deep and sacred bond of tenderness between mother and child in consequence; then, after a time, to explain the work of fatherhood, and how the love of the parents for each other was the cause of its own (the child's) existence: these things are easy and natural—at least they are so to the young mind—and excite in it no surprise, or sense of unfitness, but only gratitude and a kind of tender wonderment.* Then, later on, as the special sexual needs and desires develop, to instruct the girl or boy in the further details of the matter, and the care and right conduct of her or his own sexual nature; on the meaning and the dangers of solitary indulgence—if this habit has been contracted; on the need of self-control and the presence of affection in all relations with others, and (without asceticism) on the possibility of deflecting physical desire to some degree into affectional and emotional channels, and the great gain so resulting: all these are things which an ordinary youth of either sex will easily understand and appreciate, and which may be of priceless value, saving such an one from years of struggle in foul morasses, and waste of precious life-strength. Finally, with the maturity of the moral nature, the supremacy of the pure human relation should be taught—not the extinguishment of desire, but the attainment of the real kernel of it, its dedication to the well-being of another—the evolution of the *human* element in love, balancing the natural—till at last the snatching of an unglad pleasure, regardless of the other from whom it is snatched, or the surrender of one's body to another, for any reason except that of love, become things impossible.

**See Appendix.*

Between lovers then a kind of hardy temperance is much to be recommended—for all reasons, but especially because it lifts their satisfaction and delight in each other out of the region of ephemerality (which too soon turn to dull indifference and satiety) into the region of more lasting things—one step nearer at any rate to the Eternal Kingdom. How intoxicating indeed, how penetrating—like a most precious wine—is that love which is the sexual transformed by the magic of the will into the emotional and spiritual! And what a loss on the merest grounds of prudence and the economy of pleasure is its unbridled waste along physical channels! So nothing is so much to be dreaded between lovers as just this—the vulgarisation of love—and this is the rock upon which marriage so often splits.

There is a kind of illusion about physical desire similar to that which a child suffers from when, seeing a beautiful flower, it instantly snatches the same, and destroys in a few moments the form and fragrance which attracted it. He only gets the full glory who holds himself back a little, and truly possesses who is willing if need be not to possess.

On the other hand it must not be pretended that the physical passions are by their nature abhorrent, or anything but admirable and desirable in their place. Any attempt to absolutely disown or despise them, carried out over long periods either by individuals or bodies of people, only ends in the *thinning out* of the human nature—by the very consequent stinting of the supply of its growth-material, and is liable to stultify itself in time by leading to reactionary excesses. It must never be forgotten that the physical basis throughout life is of the first importance, and supplies the nutrition and food-stuff without which the higher powers cannot exist or at least manifest themselves. Intimacies founded on intellectual and moral affinities alone are seldom very deep and lasting; if the physical or sexual basis is quite absent, the acquaintanceship is liable to die away again like an ill-rooted plant. In many cases (especially of women) the nature is never really understood or disclosed till the sex-feeling is touched—however lightly. Besides it must be remembered that in order for a perfect intimacy between two people their bodies must by the nature of the case be free to each other. The sexual and bodily intimacy may not be the object for which they come together; but if it is denied, its denial will bar any real sense of repose and affiance, and make the relation restless, vague, tentative and unsatisfied.

In these lights it will be seen that what we call asceticism and what we call libertinism are two sides practically of the same shield. So long as the tendency towards mere pleasure-indulgence is strong and uncontrolled, so long will the instinct towards asceticism assert itself—and rightly, else we might speedily find ourselves in headlong Phaethonian career. Asceticism is in its place (as the word would indicate) as an *exercise*; but let it not be looked upon as an end in itself, for that is a mistake of the same kind as going to the

opposite extreme. Certainly if the welfare and happiness of the beloved one were always really the main purpose in our minds we should have plenty of occasion for self-control, and an artificial asceticism would not be needed. We look for a time doubtless when the hostility between these two parts of man's unperfected nature will be merged in the perfect love; but at present and until this happens their conflict is certainly one of the most pregnant things in all our experience; and must not by any means be blinked or evaded, but boldly faced. It is in itself almost a sexual act. The mortal nature through it is, so to speak, torn asunder; and through the rent so made in his mortality does it sometimes happen that a new and immortal man is born.

The Sex-act affords the type of all pleasures. The dissatisfaction which at times follows on it is the same as follows on all pleasure which is *sought*, and which does not come unsought. The dissatisfaction is not in the nature of pleasure itself but in the nature of *seeking*. In consciously surrendering oneself to the pursuit of things external, the "I" (since it really has everything and needs nothing) deceives itself, goes out from its true home, tears itself asunder, and admits a gap or rent in its own being. This is what is meant by *sin*—the separation or sundering (German *Sünde*) of one's being—and all the pain that goes therewith. It all consists in *seeking* those external things and pleasures; not (a thousand times be it said) in those external things or pleasures themselves. They are all fair and gracious enough; their place is to stand round the throne and offer their homage—rank behind rank in their multitudes—if so be we will accept it. But for us to go out of ourselves to run after *them*, to allow ourselves to be divided and rent in twain by *their* attraction, that is an inversion of the order of heaven; and in so doing does sin and all suffering enter in.

Of all pleasures the sexual tempts most strongly to this desertion of one's true self, and stands as the type of Maya and the world-illusion; yet the beauty of the loved one and the delight of corporeal union all turn to dust and ashes if bought at the price of disunion and disloyalty in the higher spheres—disloyalty even to the person whose mortal love is sought. The higher and more durable part of man, whirled along in the rapids and whirlpools of desire, experiences tortures the moment it comes to recognise that It is something other than physical. Then comes the struggle to regain its lost Paradise, and the frightful effort of co-ordination between the two natures, by which the centre of consciousness is gradually transferred from the fugitive to the more permanent part, and the mortal and changeable is assigned its due place in the outer chambers and forecourts of the temple.

Pleasure should come as the natural (and indeed inevitable) accompaniment of life, believed in with a kind of free faith, but never sought as the object of life. It is in the inversion of this order that the uncleanness of the senses arises. Sex to-day throughout the domains of civilisation is thoroughly unclean.

Everywhere it is slimed over with the thought of pleasure. Not for joy, not for mere delight in and excess of life, not for pride in the generation of children, not for a symbol and expression of deepest soul-union, does it exist—but for pleasure. Hence we disown it in our thoughts, and cover it up with false shame and unbelief—knowing well that to seek a social act for a private pleasure is a falsehood. The body itself is kept religiously covered, smothered away from the rush of the great purifying life of Nature, infected with dirt and disease, and a subject for prurient thought and exaggerated lust such as in its naked state it would never provoke. The skin becomes sickly and corrupt, and of a dead leaden white hue, which strangely enough is supposed to be more beautiful than the rich rose-brown, delicately shaded into lighter tints in the less exposed parts, which it would wear if tanned by daily welcome of sun and wind. Sexual embraces themselves are seldom sanctified by the glories of Nature, in whose presence alone, under the burning sun or the high canopy of the stars and surrounded by the fragrant atmosphere, their meaning can be fully understood: but take place in stuffy dens of dirty upholstery and are associated with all unbeautiful things.

Even literature, which might have been expected to preserve some decent expression on this topic, reflects all too clearly by its silence or by its pruriency the prevailing spirit of unbelief; and in order to find any sane faithful strong and calm words on the subject, one has to wade right back through the marshes and bogs of civilised scribbledom, and toil eastward across its arid wastes to the very dawn-hymns of the Aryan races.

In one of the Upanishads of the Vedic sacred books (the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad) there is a very beautiful passage in which instruction is given to the man who desires a noble son as to the prayers which he shall offer to the gods on the occasion of congress with his wife. In primitive simple and serene language it directs him how "when he has placed his virile member in the body of his wife and joined his mouth to her mouth" he should pray to the various forms of deity who preside over the operations of nature: to Vishnu to prepare the womb of the future mother, to Prajapati to watch over the influx of the semen, and to the other gods to nourish the foetus, etc. Nothing could be (I am judging from the only translation I have met with, a Latin one) more composed, serene, simple and religious in feeling, and well might it be if such instructions were preserved and followed, even down to the present day; yet such is the degradation we have come to that actually Max Müller in his translations of the Sacred Books of the East appears to have been unable to persuade himself to render this and a few other quite similar passages into English, but gives them in the original Sanskrit! One might have thought that as Professor in the University of Oxford, presumed *sans peur et sans reproche*, and professedly engaged in making a translation of these books for students, it was his duty and it might have been his delight to make intelligible just such passages as these, which give the pure and pious sentiment of the early world in so perfect a form; unless indeed he thought the sentiment impure and impious—in which case we have indeed a measure of the degradation of the public opinion which must have swayed his mind. As to the only German translation of the Upanishad which I can find, it baulks at the same passages in the same feeble way—repeating *nicht zu wiedergeben, nicht zu wiedergeben*, over and over again, till at last one can but conclude that the translator is right, and that the simplicity and sacredness of the feeling is in this our time indeed "not to be reproduced."

Our public opinion, our literature, our customs, our laws, are saturated with the notion of the uncleanness of Sex, and are so making the conditions of its cleanness more and more difficult. Our children, as said, have to pick up their intelligence on the subject in the gutter. Little boys bathing on the outskirts of our towns are hunted down by idiotic policemen, apparently infuriated by the sight of the naked body, even of childhood.

Lately in one of our northern towns, the boys and men bathing in a public pool set apart by the corporation for the purpose, were—though forced to wear some kind of covering—kept till nine o'clock at night before they were allowed to go into the water—lest in the full daylight Mrs. Grundy should behold any portion of their bodies! and as for women and girls their disabilities in the matter are most serious.

Till this dirty and dismal sentiment with regard to the human body is removed there can be little hope of anything like a free and gracious public life. With the regeneration of our social ideas the whole conception of Sex as a thing covert and to be ashamed of, marketable and unclean, will have to be regenerated. That inestimable freedom and pride which is the basis of all true manhood and womanhood will have to enter into this most intimate relation to preserve it frank and pure—pure from the damnable commercialism which buys and sells all human things, and from the religious hypocrisy which covers and conceals; and a healthy delight in and cultivation of the body and all its natural functions and a determination to keep them pure and beautiful, open and sane and free, will have to become a recognised part of national life.

Possibly, and indeed probably, as the sentiment of common life and common interest grows, and the capacity for true companionship increases with the decrease of self-regarding anxiety, the importance of the mere sex-act will dwindle till it comes to be regarded as only one very specialised factor in the full total of human love. There is no doubt that with the full realisation of affectional union the need of actual bodily congress loses some of its urgency; and it is not difficult to see in our present-day social life that the want of the former is (according to the law of transmutation) one marked cause of the violence and extravagance of the lower passions. But however things may change with the further evolution of man, there is no doubt that first of all the sex-relation must be divested of the sentiment of uncleanness which surrounds it, and rehabilitated again with a sense almost of religious consecration; and this means, as I have said, a free people, proud in the mastery and the divinity of their own lives, and in the beauty and openness of their own bodies.

Sex is the allegory of Love in the physical world. It is from this fact that it derives its immense power. The aim of Love is non-differentiation—absolute union of being; but absolute union can only be found at the centre of existence. Therefore whoever has truly found another has found not only that other, and with that other himself, but has found also a third—who dwells at the centre and holds the plastic material of the universe in the palm of his hand, and is a creator of sensible forms.

Similarly the aim of sex is union and non-differentiation—but on the physical plane,—and in the moment when this union is accomplished creation takes place, and the generation (in the plastic material of the sex-elements) of sensible forms.

In the animal and lower human world—and wherever the creature is incapable of realising the perfect love (which is indeed able to transform it into a god)—Nature in the purely physical instincts does the next best thing, that is, she effects a corporeal union and so generates another creature who by the very process of his generation shall be one step nearer to the universal soul and the realisation of the desired end. Nevertheless the moment the other love and all that goes with it is realised the natural sexual love has to fall into a secondary place—the lover must stand on his feet and not on his head—or else the most dire confusions ensue, and torments *æonian*.

Taking all together I think it may fairly be said that the prime object of Sex is *union*, the physical union as the allegory and expression of the real union, and that generation is a secondary object or result of this union. If we go to the lowest material expressions of Sex—as among the protozoic cells—we find that they, the cells, unite together, two into one; and that, as a result of the nutrition that ensues, this joint cell after a time (but not always) breaks up by fission into a number of progeny cells; or if on the other hand we go to the very highest expression of Sex, in the sentiment of Love, we find the latter takes the form chiefly and before all else of a desire for union, and only in lesser degree of a desire for race-propagation.

I mention this because it probably makes a good deal of difference in our estimate of Sex whether the one function or the other is considered primary. There is perhaps a slight tendency among medical and other authorities to overlook the question of the important physical actions and reactions, and even corporeal modifications, which may ensue upon sexual intercourse between two people, and to fix their attention too exclusively upon their child-bearing function; but in truth it is probable, I think, from various considerations, that the spermatozoa pass through the tissues and affect the general body of the female, as well as that the male absorbs minutest cells *from* the female; and that generally, even without the actual Sex-act, there is an interchange of vital and etherial elements—so that there is a kind of generation taking place *in each other*, as well as that more specialised generation which consists in the propagation of the race.

At the last and taking it as a whole one has the same difficulty in dealing with the subject of Love which meets one at every turn in modern life—the monstrous separation of one part of our nature from another—the way in which—no doubt in the necessary course of evolution—we have cut ourselves in twain as it were, and assigned "right" and "wrong," heaven and hell, spiritual and material, and other violent distinctions, to the separate portions. We have eaten of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil with a vengeance! The Lord has indeed driven us out of Paradise into the domain of that "fabro vulcano" who with tremendous hammer-strokes must *hammer the knowledge of good and evil out of us again*. I feel that I owe an apology to the beautiful god for daring even for a moment to think of dissecting his soul from body, and for speaking as if these artificial distinctions were in any wise eternal. Will the man or woman, or race of men and women, never come, to whom love in its various manifestations shall be from the beginning a perfect whole, pure and natural, free and standing sanely on its feet?

APPENDIX.

"I analysed a flower, I pointed out to her the beauty of colouring, the gracefulness of shape, the tender shades, the difference between the parts composing the flowers. Gradually, I told her what these parts were called. I showed her the pollen, which clung like a beautiful golden powder to her little rosy fingers. I showed her through the microscope that this beautiful powder was composed of an infinite number of small grains. I made her examine the pistil more closely, and I showed her, at the end of the tube, the ovary, which I called a 'little house full of very tiny children.' I showed her the pollen glued to the pistil, and I told her, that when the pollen of one flower, carried away by the wind, or by the insects, fell on the pistil of another flower, the small grains died, and a tiny drop of moisture passed through the tube and entered into the little house where the very tiny children dwelt; that these tiny children were like small eggs, that in each small egg there was an almost invisible opening, through which a little of the small drop passed; that when this drop of pollen mixed with some other wonderful power in the ovary, that both joined together to give life, and the eggs developed and became grains or fruit. I have shown her flowers which had only a pistil and others which had only stamens. I said to her, smiling, that the pistils were like little mothers, and the stamens like little fathers of the fruit....

"Thus I sowed in this innocent heart and searching mind the seeds of that delicate science, which degenerates into obscenity, if the mother, through false shame, leaves the instruction of her child to its schoolfellows. Let my little girl ask me, if she likes, the much dreaded question; I will only have to remind her of the botany lessons, simply adding, the same thing happens to human beings, with this difference, that what is done unconsciously by the plants, is done consciously by us; that in a properly arranged society one only unites one's self to the person one loves."—(Translated from "La Revendication des Droits Féminins," *Shafts*, April 1894, p. 237.)

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