

THE DANGERS OF SEXUAL ABSTINENCE

BY EDWIN W. HIRSCH

WHILE the reformers of America have of late been galloping madly in all directions, seeking to legislate happiness and social security into the human being, they have nimbly dodged one of the most important of all social problems, namely, sex. Were the uplifters as honestly concerned with racial progress as their press-agents would have us believe, they could hardly have evaded this issue; indeed, they would have attacked it with the same vigor which identified the Prohibition campaign and similar soul-saving movements. But alas, their insincerity toward actual betterment of the race is as patent as that of all professional do-gooders. Instead of hauling sex from under the bed and addressing it with logic and reason, they have quietly dropped it out the window.

This attitude is all the more extraordinary when one considers that sex is second only to eating as a physiological function. The widespread antagonism to the normal expression of sex urges, nurtured for generations in America, has

given rise to more human misery and suffering, more mental aberrations and self-destruction, than all the evils of modern economics put together. Thus, if the reformers were really in search of a problem to test their mettle, they would set upon sex without further ado. The likelihood, however, of such action is so remote that it is not amiss to analyze here one of the fundamental causes of social insecurity — the myth of sexual abstinence.

Sexual energy, like any other form of energy, cannot be destroyed; it can only be transformed. Hence, the problem demanding solution today is to indicate a method of conduct which will convert sexual force, both active and latent, into useful channels when body development is reaching its height. This stage, manifest in all humans between the ages of fifteen and twenty-two, is synchronous with the time when male and female are evincing the strongest interest in each other. Young men and women, emerging from the twilight zone of adolescence, enter

this crucial stage with pliant bodies and plastic minds; they are ready to absorb the vital knowledge which will make life intelligible. But constantly thwarting them is the powerful sex urge, coloring their thinking, absorbing their interest, and opening up an alluring dream world.

Only a few years ago it was thought that sexual life commenced at the period of puberty, and remained more or less quiescent until the legal age of maturity. It has now been demonstrated that sexual impulses assert themselves at birth and continue during the life of the individual. Extended observations have shown conclusively that infants enjoy a type of sexual activity; turgescence of the male genital organ is not infrequent, and the female infant exhibits similar reactions. But such signs need not be confined to the sexual organs. There are other reactions equally confirmatory. At a very early age, the child is likely to ask his parents how he came into being, and demand information concerning the construction of his body. The stork story usually suffices; yet it is a rare child, indeed, who believes it. Children usually patronize their parents by listening to such tales, but following the pretense, they invariably ask fur-

ther pointed and, to the average parent, embarrassing questions. The normal response to this healthy tendency is a stringent regulation of the child's conduct. No longer is he allowed to discuss his body-urges freely and openly. The weapon of regimentation is found in the development of a sense of shame; the result is a repression of the free exercise of natural inclinations.

When puberty is reached, there are signs of activity in the genital region of both sexes. But to curtail the newly stimulated interest in the sexual organs, the child is told that it is sinful to touch them, and thus, by additional repression and suppression, natural inclinations are held in check. The young boy is further disturbed by involuntary evacuations of semen during sleep, causing him intense worry before he discovers that this occurrence is a normal, harmless process. Many youngsters, however, before ascertaining the truth about the phenomenon, read a vast amount of the pseudo-medical rubbish which has been written for the purpose of alarming youth. Such terms as "loss of manhood", "seepage of vital power", "degeneration of the vital centers in the spinal cord", and "mental deterioration" have been used to describe the effects of

nature's method of expelling an excess of normal secretion—a purely mechanical combusive process.

Next we come to the problem of auto-erotism, which not so many years ago was regarded as the crime of crimes, but is now looked upon as a normal development of sexual life. At first, the practice was called Onanism after the Biblical Onan who caused his seed to be spilled to the ground (*Gen. xxxviii*, 8, 9); then the term masturbation (from *manus*—hand—and *struprum*—defilement) was introduced, but it retained an unpleasant connotation. Even in certain abridged dictionaries published as late as 1915, the word was omitted because of the odium attached to it. Finally, thanks to Havelock Ellis, the word *auto-erotism* was coined, and this trivial change in terminology made possible a wholesale study of a natural manifestation of the sex urge in growing youth.

In the opinion of the past generation, this voluntary method of relieving sexual tension was a sign of degeneracy, displayed by weak-willed individuals alone. Modern teaching, on the other hand, discloses that the procedure is an emergency escape when other methods of outlet are inadequate,

i.e., a temporary substitute to be used until the individual finds the normal answer to his quest.

Though most of the attention in regard to the habit has been focused on the male, it is now recognized that the female, once regarded as immune to such flights of behavior, and therefore outside the pale of sexual errors, is no stranger to the practice. It took the medical profession and the laity some years to recover from the shock of Freud's contention that the female also had to overcome an emotional barrier akin to that in the male. Statistical studies by Davis, Dickinson, Beam, Hamilton, and others show that in young women the resort to auto-erotism is not less frequent than in the male, that the practice is rarely carried to excess, that health is not impaired as a result, and that the habit is generally discontinued upon marriage.

Nevertheless, fretting over self-gratification is the rock on which many young minds are wrecked every day. Nervous breakdown is often the explanation tendered parents to explain those strange symptoms so commonly encountered when the individual resorts to flight from the usual routine. Yet mental-hygienists have rehabilitated thousands of adolescents by

eradicating the sense of guilt which accompanies all imagined infractions of the moral code. They have converted nervous young men and women into healthy individuals with a sane outlook on life and its sexual problems.

II

Normally, sexual energy can be dissipated to some extent by the process of sublimation, the act of utilizing it in non-sexual channels of activity. But in youth, when the force is at its height, sublimation can only suffice to a limited degree. Exercise, however, is one healthful method of diversion. Each form of sport permits the conversion of exuberant energy into playful activity. The benefits derived are not, as is sometimes supposed, due to the fatigue that games induce: on the contrary, over-fatigue should be avoided because it is apt to result in a stimulation of the sexual centers. But normal engagement in sports is decidedly beneficial; tennis allows rhythmic and graceful movement; swimming permits the exhibitionistic element to exert itself; boxing absorbs a portion of man's sadistic and masochistic nature. Furthermore, sublimation can be practiced in the arts, *e.g.*, painting, sculptur-

ing, writing, scientific research, the study of geology, astronomy, and botany. Hobbies such as book, plant, insect, autograph, and stamp collecting, are also useful adjuncts. Most important, however, is the possession of the correct social attitude. Activities such as dancing, conversation, and card-playing permit young men and women to give expression to their sexual emotions, and so dispel some of their amative force.

There are those who pride themselves on being abstinent yet resort to self-excitement to quell the body urge. Others derive sexual satisfaction from creating mental erotic pictures. Still others bring about relief by auto-erotism. But neither these persons, nor the individuals who focus all their love-life on those who can never serve as legitimate sexual objects, can lay claim to abstention. The latter relationships are fixations when they so absorb the love-aim that the objective is not sought, as in the case of a son who is so devoted to his mother that he is able to avoid all attraction from the female sex. Similar relationships also exist between daughter and father, between brother and sister. These bonds are normal in early youth, but are usually broken when sexual maturity is reached. Psychologi-

cally speaking, abstinence is a rarity and the problem of utilizing the indomitable sex force confronts practically everyone.

Now the teaching that continence over indefinite periods is harmless to the individual was once freely promulgated. The writers of the past all had one idea in mind: frighten the young and hold them in subjugation. They declared that the genital organs, not being muscular, did not require use to preserve their functions. The average youth, unfamiliar with the facts of physiology, was not able to discern the errors in such preposterous conclusions. Today, however, scientists and common-sense physicians are gradually debunking much of this vicious propaganda; the sex problem is being elucidated by looking facts in the face.

There is, of course, no question that great harm can result if young people adopt an anti-social attitude in order to ward off all stimuli engendered by the opposite sex. It can further be frankly stated that sexual abstinence beyond the maturity of youth, approximately the twenty-second year, is a very difficult task — especially for the male. In fact, the enormous incidence of psychic impotency is closely related to the effect of fear complexes

engendered at this impressionistic period.

The peril of venereal disease is also one of the danger signals waved in youth's path. Prostitutes spread disease; *ergo*, at all cost avoid the prostitute. An infinite number of lectures on the peril of prostitution have been given and an endless number of tracts on white slavery and the dissemination of disease have been written, but the real truth of the matter has not been revealed. Any venereologist with an aptitude for tracing the source of infection knows that the professional prostitute is the least dangerous source. The harlot knows much more about prophylaxis than her righteous sister. Though rarely admitted, the girl who occasionally indulges in sexual intercourse for pleasure is most commonly the infective agent. She knows practically nothing about venereal disease and cares less. Still another who spreads disease is the married or divorced woman who, because of her social status or the fact that she has had children, is regarded as immune to infection.

Many young men have their ardor for the opposite sex dampened by a fear, usually implanted at an early age, that any sexual activity is punishable by the loss of

the penis. Freud has termed it the castration complex. We see the consequences of this fear in the young men who avoid sexual intercourse because of physical shame. The school of individual psychology appropriately terms this phenomenon organ-inferiority. In searching for the cause of this idiotic notion, we find evidence to prove that the youth, on manifesting signs of virility, was frightened by someone who warned him that any use of the sexual organ for pleasure would result in its impairment.

Another cause of sexual inadequacy is fear of woman. Youth in his search for a love-object often seeks an image of his creation—the ideal woman. When enchanted, he is inclined to set the female on a pedestal and regard her as an object of adoration rather than as a human being like himself, possessed of the same emotions and desires. This tendency to overestimate the qualities of a mate often leads him to regard her as a member of an untouchable sect.

III

How, then, is youth to overcome all these various fears, so as to attain and consummate a union with his love-object? Education is the

antidote for fear. It entails a broad program, but the first myth to disprove is that sexual activity is bestial. Next, by dispelling the fairy tales about birth, much of the disturbing conflict existing in the child's mind concerning sex will be eradicated. Furthermore, courses in physiology will help dispel the fear that sexual phenomena are abnormal. Not so long ago it was thought that women who expressed any signs of sexual enjoyment were vulgar, and that sexual enjoyment was purely a male prerogative. To outward appearances the female is more capable of suppressing sexual inclination, but the actual facts speak otherwise. The vast number of neurotics and psychotics among women is evidence of unsuccessful repression. Unhappily, the woman who is *virgo intacta* after ten years of married life resents the only prescription which could cure her.

Promiscuity is not the answer to the problem of sexual abstinence. Even under ideal conditions the mechanism of sexual union at first is not a simple matter. There are psychological barriers that have to be overcome. Failure more often than success is the first problem with which the young couple must contend. But if there is love, companionship, and mutual under-

standing, the initial fright passes away and satisfactory sexual appeasement is brought about.

It is possible to present an endless number of clinical cases to illustrate the effects of rigid suppression. The vast number of anxiety-neuroses (formerly termed neurasthenia) are due to the attempt to restrain the libido. Young people suffering from this disorder are seldom aware that the malady about which they complain is due to a deprivation of a normal sexual outlet. Such neuroses, the result of sexual frustration, are an economic burden to the individual and society. The cost of defending the human being against the caprice of sex is far greater than the cost of normal sexual activity. Millions of dollars are spent on drugs to kill the sexual appetite and more millions are spent on compounds to enhance the potency of organically normal men and women, who believe themselves to be deficient. Self-imposed invalidism as a defense reaction against sex stimuli

is a common condition, generally unrecognized by relatives. Within our institutions there is confined many a case of hysterical paralysis due to psychic trauma of sexual origin.

What, then, ought to be the attitude of society and of youth toward the beckoning call of the magnetic force? It ought to be such that, in a limited way, the individual may be able to apply some of the precepts he has learned from experiences with the laws of natural selection. Youth should be given the opportunity to perceive psychically the joy of the mystic force, without feeling that such activities are enveloped in sin and shame. Young men and women familiar with the urge that activates those centers of the body which induce an elated feeling will come to look upon the sexual urge not as a mysterious stranger but as a natural concomitant of life. They should be taught that the sexual force stimulates the creative urge and all forms of ennobling activity.



NEITHER CAPITALISM NOR SOCIALISM

BY HILAIRE BELLOC

The economic system known as Distributism is being widely discussed. Mr. Belloc, generally recognized as the leader of the movement, describes its chief points.

DISTRIBUTISM is a long and clumsy word which is coming into use for a very simple and normal thing: the system of society in which the average citizen possesses enough property to give him and his family economic freedom. There was a time when everyone took it for granted, especially in the United States, that the typical free citizen would be an owner — generally an owner of land and if not the owner of land, then the owner of a business or the master of a craft. But today, wherever industrial capitalism rules — and it rules in all our main industries, including our transport system — a perilous and unnatural state of things has come to pass. The bulk of men are still called *free citizens*, for they are still politically free; but they are no longer economically free. They no longer possess the wherewithal to live. They live only at the mercy

of employers who possess the means of life — the reserves of food and clothing and house-room and instruments of production — or by support from the community doled out by the officers thereof.

In the presence of this unprecedented arrangement of society, a new word had to be found for the old thing, which had been nameless mainly because it had been taken for granted and was universal. For myself I should have preferred the word *Proprietary*, though that is rather long and pedantic. But on the existing models of *Socialism* and *Collectivism*, it was agreed to take the word *Distributism*. As the Socialist desires or accepts an arrangement of society wherein the means of production are vested in the community (society itself, the collectivity), so the Distributist desires a society in which the means of production are distributed as property among