

THE SEX SIDE OF LIFE

An Explanation for Young People

BY MARY WARE DENNETT

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SIXTH PRINTING

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THE SEX SIDE OF LIFE FIRST APPEARED IN THE *Medical Review of Reviews* FOR FEBRUARY, 1918. THE FOLLOWING IS QUOTED FROM THE EDITOR'S FOREWORD.

We have come across so much rubbish on this subject that we drifted into the conclusion that an honest sex essay for young folks would not be produced by this generation.

Recently there came to this desk a manuscript bearing the title *The Sex Side of Life* and the sub-title *An Explanation for Young People*, written by Mary Ware Dennett. No editor ever confesses that he reads an article with prejudice, but we will admit that we expected this MS would be “returned with thanks.” It was reasonable to suppose that a laywoman would not succeed where physicians had failed. Even after we had read the introduction we were not convinced, for we have met several books whose texts do not fulfill the promises made by the preface. But after reading a few pages of the essay itself, we realized we were listening to the music of a different drummer. Instead of the familiar notes of fear and pretense, we were surprised to hear the clarion call of truth.

Mary Ware Dennett's *Sex Side of Life* is “on the level.” In the pages of the *Medical Review of Reviews*, her essay will reach only the profession, but we sincerely hope that this splendid contribution will be reprinted in pamphlet form and distributed by thousands to the general public. We are tolerably familiar with Anglo-American writings on sexology, but we know nothing that equals Mrs. Dennett's brochure. Physicians and social workers are frequently asked: “What shall I say to my growing child?” Mary Ware Dennett, in her rational sex primer, at last furnishes a satisfactory answer.

V. R.

THE SEX SIDE OF LIFE

INTRODUCTION FOR ELDERS

In reading several dozen books on sex matters for the young with a view to selecting the best for my own children, I found none that I was willing to put into their hands, without first guarding them against what I considered very misleading and harmful impressions, which they would otherwise be sure to acquire in reading them. That is the excuse for this article.

It is far more specific than most sex information written for young people. I believe we owe it to children to be specific if we talk about the subject at all.

From a careful observation of youthful curiosity and a very vivid recollection of my own childhood, I have tried to explain frankly the points about which there is the greatest inquiry. These points are *not* frankly or clearly explained in most sex literature. They are avoided, partly from embarrassment, but more, apparently, because those who have undertaken to instruct the children are not really clear in their own minds as to the proper status of the sex relation.

I found that from the physiological point of view, the question was handled with limitations and reservations. From the point of natural science it was often handled with sentimentality, the child being led from a semi-esthetic study of the reproduction of flowers and animals to the acceptance of a similar idea for human beings. From the moral point of view it was handled least satisfactorily of all, the child being given a jumble of conflicting ideas, with no means of correlating them,—fear of venereal disease, one's duty to suppress “animal passion,” the sacredness of marriage, and so forth. And from the emotional point of view, the subject was not handled at all.

This one omission seems to me to be the key to the whole situation, and it is the basis of the radical departure I have made from the precedents in most sex literature for children.

Concerning all four points of view just mentioned, there are certain departures from the traditional method that have seemed to me worth making.

On the physiological side I have given, as far as possible, the proper terminology for the sex organs and functions. Children have had to read the expurgated literature which has been specially prepared for them in poetic or colloquial terms, and then are needlessly mystified when they hear things called by their real names.

On the side of natural science, I have emphasized our unlikeness to the plants and animals rather than our likeness, for while the points we have in common with the lower orders make an interesting section in our general education, it is knowing about the vital points in which we differ that helps us to solve the sexual problems of maturity; and the child needs that knowledge precisely as he needs knowledge of everything which will fortify him for wise decisions when he is grown.

On the moral side, I have tried to avoid confusion and dogmatism in the following ways: by eliminating fear of venereal disease as an appeal for strictly limited sex relations, stating candidly that venereal disease *is* becoming curable; by barring out all mention of “brute” or “animal” passion, terms frequently used in pleas for chastity and self control, as such talk is an aspersion on the brutes and has done children much harm in giving them the impression that there is an essential baseness in the sex relation; by inviting the inference that marriage is “sacred” by virtue of its being a reflection of human ideality rather than because it is a legalized institution.

Unquestionably the stress which most writers have laid upon the beauty of nature's plans for perpetuating the plant and animal species, and the effort to have the child carry over into human life some sense of that beauty has come from a most commendable instinct to protect the child from the natural shock of the revelation of so much that is unesthetic and revolting

in human sex life. The nearness of the sex organs to the excretory organs, the pain and messiness of childbirth are elements which certainly need some compensating antidote to prevent their making too disagreeable and disproportionate an impress on the child's mind.

The results are doubtless good as far as they go, but they do not go nearly far enough. What else is there to call upon to help out? Why, the one thing which has been persistently neglected by practically all the sex writers,—the emotional side of sex experience. Parents and teachers have been afraid of it and distrustful of it. In not a single one of all the books for young people that I have thus far read has there been the frank, unashamed declaration that the climax of sex emotion is an unsurpassed joy, something which rightly belongs to every normal human being, a joy to be proudly and serenely experienced. Instead there has been all too evident an inference that sex emotion is a thing to be ashamed of, that yielding to it is indulgence which must be curbed as much as possible, that all thought and understanding of it must be rigorously postponed, at any rate till after marriage.

We give to young folks, in their general education, as much as they can grasp of science and ethics and art, and yet in their sex education, which rightly has to do with all of these, we have said, "Give them only the bare physiological facts, lest they be prematurely stimulated." Others of us, realizing that the bare physiological facts are shocking to many a sensitive child, and must somehow be softened with something pleasant, have said, "Give them the

facts, yes, but see to it that they are so related to the wonders of evolution and the beauties of the natural world that the shock is minimized.” But none of us has yet dared to say, “Yes, give them the facts, give them the nature study, too, but also give them some conception of sex life as a vivifying joy, as a vital art, as a thing to be studied and developed with reverence for its big meaning, with understanding of its far-reaching reactions, psychologically and spiritually, with temperant restraint, good taste and the highest idealism.” We have contented ourselves by assuming that marriage makes sex relations respectable. We have not yet said that it is only beautiful sex relations that can make marriage lovely.

Young people are just as capable of being guided and inspired in their thought about sex emotion as in their taste and ideals in literature and ethics, and just as they imperatively need to have their general taste and ideals cultivated as a preparation for mature life, so do they need to have some understanding of the marvelous place which sex emotion has in life.

Only such an understanding can be counted on to give them the self control that is born of knowledge, not fear, the reverence that will prevent premature or trivial connections, the good taste and finesse that will make their sex life when they reach maturity a vitalizing success.

AN EXPLANATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

When boys and girls get into their “teens,” a side of them begins to wake up which has been asleep or only partly developed ever since they were born, that is, the sex side of them. It is the most wonderful and interesting part of growing up. This waking is partly of the mind, partly of the body and partly of the feelings or emotions.

You can't help wanting to understand all about it, but somehow you find yourself a little embarrassed in asking all the questions that come into your mind, and often you don't feel quite like talking about it freely, even to your father and mother. Sometimes it is easier to talk with your best friends, because they are your own age, and are beginning to have these new feelings too.

But remember that young people don't know nearly so much about it as older people do, and that the older ones really want to help you with their experience and advice; and yet, they, like you, often feel rather embarrassed themselves and don't know how to go about it. I suppose it is because it is all so very personal and still remains somewhat mysterious, in spite of all that people know about it.

If our bodies were just like machines, then we could learn about them and manage them quite scientifically as we do automobiles, but they are not like that. They are more than machines that have to be supplied with fuel (food) and kept clean and oiled (by bathing, exercise and sleep). They are the homes of our souls and our feelings, and that makes all the difference in the world in the way we act, and it makes what we have to learn, not limited to science only, but it has to include more difficult and complicated things like psychology and morality.

Maybe I can't make this article help you, but I remember so well what I wanted to know and how I felt when I was young that I am now going to try. And I will tell you to start out with that there is a great deal that nobody knows yet, in spite of the fact that the human race has been struggling thousands of years to learn.

Life itself is still a mystery, especially human life. Human life, in many respects, is like plant and animal life, but in many ways it is entirely different, and the ways in which it is different are almost more important for us to think about than the ways in which it is similar. In all life, except in the very lowest forms, new life is created by the coming together, in a very close and special way, of the male and female elements. You have studied at school about the plants and you probably have observed certain of the animals, so you know something about what this means if you do not understand it thoroughly.

But what you want to know most of all is just how it is with human beings. You want to know just what this coming together is, how it is done, how it starts the new life, the baby, and how the baby is born. You want to understand the wonderful sex organs, that are different in men and women, what each part is for and how it works.

If you feel very curious and excited and shy about it, don't let yourself be a bit worried or ashamed. Your feelings are quite natural, and most everybody else has felt just the same way at your age. Remember that strong feelings are immensely valuable to us. All we need to do is to steer them in the right direction and keep them well balanced and proportioned.

Now in order to understand something of why this subject stirs us so, we must notice in what ways we human beings are *different* from the plants and animals. About the lowest form of life is the amoeba. It looks like a little lump of jelly, and it produces its young by merely separating itself in two. One part drifts off from the other part and each becomes a separate live being. There is no male and no female and they didn't *know* they were doing it. In the plants a higher stage of development is reached: there is the male and the female and they join together, not by coming to each other, or because they *know* they belong together, but quite unconsciously, with the aid of the bees and other insects and the wind, the male part is carried to the female part—they mix, and at once the seed of a new plant begins to grow.

Then come to the animals. In all higher forms of animal life, the male creature *comes* to the female creature and himself places within her body the germ which, when it meets the egg which is waiting for it, immediately makes a new life begin to grow. But the animals come together without *knowing why*. They do it from instinct only, and they do it in what is called the mating season, which is usually in the spring. The mating season happens once a year among most of the higher animals, like birds and wild cattle, but to some animals it comes several times a year like the rabbits, for instance. You doubtless know already that the more highly developed the animal, the longer it takes the young one to grow before it is born, and the longer the period when it is helpless to provide its own food and care.

Now we come to human beings, and see how different they are! They have no regular mating season, and while there is a certain amount of instinct in men and women which tends to bring them together, the sex impulse among highly developed people is far more the result of their feeling of love for each other than mere animal instinct alone. Many of the animals make no choice at all in their mating. Any near-by female will do for the male. But among some of the higher animals the male has a special instinct for a certain female, and the female will not tolerate any but a certain male. Most of the animals have different mates every season, though there are a few kinds where the male and female, once having mated, remain mates for years, sometimes even for life. But it is *only human beings* whose mating is what

we call “falling in love,” and that is an experience far beyond anything that the animals know.

It means that a man and a woman feel that they *belong* to each other in a way that they belong to no one else; it makes them wonderfully happy to be together; they find they want to live together, work together, play together, and to have children together, that is, to marry each other; and their dream is to be happy together all their lives. Sometimes the dream does not come true, and there is much failure and unhappiness, but just the same people go right on trying to make it a success, because it is what they care most for.

The sex attraction is the strongest feeling that human beings know, and unlike the animals, it is far more than a mere sensation of the body. It takes in the emotions and the mind and the soul, and that is why our happiness is so dependent upon it.

When a man and a woman fall in love so that they really belong to each other, the physical side of the relation is this: both of them feel at intervals a peculiar thrill or glow, particularly in the sexual organs, and it naturally culminates after they have gone to bed at night. The man's special sex organ or penis, becomes enlarged and stiffened, instead of soft and limp as ordinarily, and thus it easily enters the passage in the woman's body called the vagina or birth-canal, which leads to the uterus or womb, which as perhaps you already know is the sac in which the egg or embryo grows into a baby. The penis and the vagina are about the same

size, as Nature intended them to fit each other. By a rhythmic movement of the penis in and out, the sex act reaches an exciting climax or orgasm, when there is for the woman a peculiarly satisfying contraction of the muscles of the passage and for the man, the expulsion of the semen, the liquid which contains the germs of life. This is followed by a sensation of peaceful happiness and sleepy relaxation. It is the very greatest physical pleasure to be had in all human experience, and it helps very much to increase all other kinds of pleasure also. It is at this time that married people not only are closest to each other physically, but they feel closer to each other in every other way too. It is then most of all that they feel *sure* they belong to each other.

The sex act is called by various names, such as coitus, coition, copulation, cohabitation, sex-intercourse, the sex-embrace, etc. But all these terms refer to the same thing. The first coitus is apt to be somewhat painful for the woman, as there is usually a thin membrane, called the hymen, partly closing the vagina which has to be broken through, but all women do not have it and it varies in size and thickness with different people.

Without the sex act, no babies could be created, for it is by this means only that the semen which contains the male part of the germ of life can meet the ovum or the female part of the germ of life. When the two parts come together in the woman's body under just the right conditions, a baby begins to grow—at first so tiny that it could hardly be seen without a

microscope, and finally, after nine months' growth in the uterus or womb of the mother till it weighs about seven or eight pounds, it is born, a live human being. The birth process is called *labor*, and it is indeed labor, for it usually means much pain and struggle for the mother, although the baby's journey from the uterus to the world is only a few inches. It takes anywhere from an hour to two days for a baby to be born. Doctors are learning more and more how to lessen the pain, and by the end of another generation it ought to be possible for child-birth to be practically painless for most women. By that time people will more generally understand how to have babies *only* when they want them and can afford them. At present, unfortunately, it is against the law to give people information as to how to manage their sex relations so that no baby will be created unless the father and mother are ready and glad to have it happen.

Now you must understand something about this intricate sexual machinery. Plate I shows the woman's organs and Plate 2 the man's. Both these illustrations are sections, as if the body were cut in two vertically.

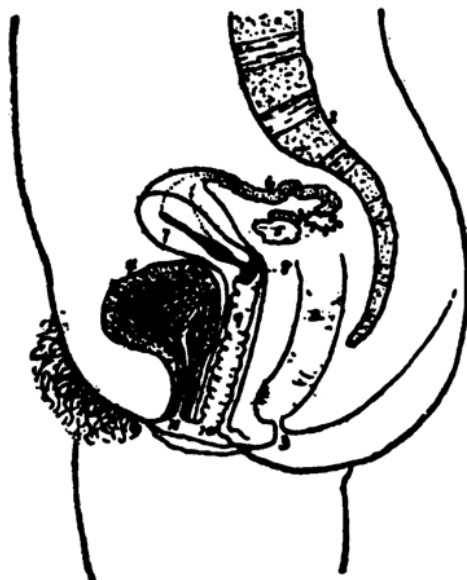


Plate One

1. Backbone.
2. Rectum, which carries away the solid waste matter from the bowels.
3. Anus, the opening of the rectum.
4. Bladder, which holds the waste water or urine.
5. Ovary, in which grows the ovum or egg.
6. Fallopian tube, which carries the ovum to the uterus.
7. Uterus or Womb, in which the egg or ovum grows into a baby.
8. Mouth of the Uterus, through which the semen has to go to meet the ovum.
9. Vagina or Birth Canal, into which the penis fits during the sex act.
10. Entrance to the Vagina.
11. Entrance to the Urethra, which carries away the waste water or urine.

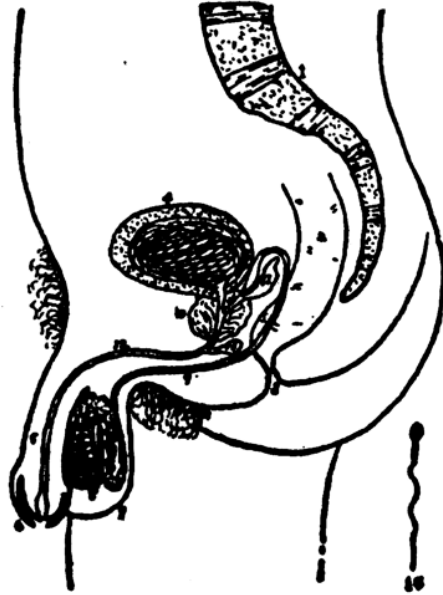


Plate Two

1. Backbone.
2. Rectum, which carries away the solid waste matter from the bowels.
3. Anus, the opening of the rectum.
4. Bladder, which holds the waste water or urine.
5. Penis, which fits into the vagina, during the sex act.
6. Prepuce, or fore-skin.
7. Scrotum, the bag which holds the testicles.
8. Testicles, in which grow the spermatozoa, or germs of life.
9. Vas Deferens, which carries the spermatozoa to the urethra.
10. Prostate Gland.
11. Seminal Vesicle.

Both 10 and 11 secrete liquids that make part of the semen, and which nourish the spermatozoa.

12. Urethra, which carries the spermatozoa, also the urine.

13. Cowper's Gland, which secretes a liquid which makes the urethra alkaline.

14. One of the spermatozoa, or germs of life, much magnified.

Sometimes it seems very distasteful to us that the sex or generative organs should be placed so near to what we might call our “sewerage system.” We do not like to have to connect in our thought anything so sweet and nice as a baby or so happy and precious as the sex embrace with the waste of our bodies, which we want to be rid of with as little thought as possible, as it is disagreeable at best, and we wonder why we were created this way. But we have to remember that the sex organs are very delicate and they are probably placed where they can best be protected from injury. It would be hard to think of any other part of the body that would be safer than just this place. At any rate there they are, and our duty is to understand them as best we can, and take mighty good care of them as our most wonderful possession.

Looking at Plate I, you will see that the woman's body provides the egg or ovum. These grow, many thousands of them, in two small sacs called ovaries, and every little while (usually every four weeks, but not always) an ovum ripens and passes out from the ovary through the fallopian tube (there are two of these, one leading from each ovary) into the uterus or womb, a process which takes several days. Here it may be met by the male life element, and if so, it becomes fertilized and remains in the uterus to grow into a baby. This is called fertilization, fecundation, impregnation or conception. But if the egg is not fertilized, it passes from the uterus through the vagina and out of the body. The ovaries take turns in developing the ovum.

Every twenty-eight days or so a woman, from the time she is about thirteen or fourteen till she is about fifty, has a slight flow of blood from the uterus, which is called menstruation. The reasons for this are not wholly understood, but it is supposed there is an extra supply of blood provided periodically for the growth of a baby, but when there is no baby starting to grow, the blood is not needed so it flows away (about once in four weeks). Often the unfertilized ovum is carried away with it, but the two things do not necessarily happen at the same time. Menstruation lasts from three to five days and young girls sometimes have pain then and feel languid and “unwell.” If so they should be quieter than usual and avoid cold baths and getting their feet wet. But menstruation is not an illness, and a girl in perfect health finds it only a slight inconvenience.

The ovaries not only produce the egg, but they also produce a secretion that is absorbed by the blood and which is most necessary in the development of a girl into a woman. It has an almost magical effect in adding the specially womanly qualities to the body and character.

Looking at Plate 2, you will see the man's sex machinery. The testicles are to a man what the ovaries are to a woman. They are two sacs held in a bag of rather thin loose skin called the scrotum, and it is here that the sperm (spermatozoa) or germ of life grows. Just how no one really knows. The spermatozoa are very tiny and the testicles hold many thousands of them. Under the microscope they show a sort of head and tail like a pollywog. They are very much alive and move by a rapid wiggling of the tail part.

Leading from each testicle is a tube called the vas deferens, through which the sperm goes at the time of the sex act on its way out to meet the ovum in the woman's body. On the way it is joined by two other liquids, one secreted by the seminal vesicles (of which there are two) and the other by the prostate gland. These three liquids together form the semen, which at the times of sexual excitement is forced out through the penis into the vagina of the woman.

You will notice that the woman has separate tubes for the urine (waste water) and the sex function, but the man uses the same tube for both: that is, in the woman the bladder which holds the urine is emptied by a separate tube, the urethra, while in the man the urethra not only empties the bladder, but it also carries the semen.

The use of the seminal vesicles and the prostate gland is to supply a means of nourishment for the spermatozoa until they reach the ovum, which may not be for several days after the semen is expelled into the vagina.

Then there are two small glands called Cowper's glands, which make the passage in the penis alkaline, as the spermatozoa can only remain alive in an alkaline secretion and the urine is acid, so always just before the penis forces out the semen, the secretion from Cowper's glands goes ahead to protect the sperm from being destroyed by any remaining traces of the acid urine.

At the end of the penis is a fold or cap of skin, the prepuce, which the doctor often removes for the sake of the boy's health, a process called circumcision, and it is a great relief to boys whose prepuce or foreskin is too tight as to make difficulty in keeping clean. All Jewish babies are regularly circumcised, a custom dating way back to Bible times.

There is a constant internal secretion from the testicles of a man just as from the ovaries of a woman, and it has the same beneficial effect on the whole being. It makes a boy what we call manly or virile. The value of the internal secretions of the sex organs in both boys and girls is so great that for that reason, if for no other, the whole sex machinery must be kept in perfect health.

Boys have a certain discomfort to bear which is difficult for them just as menstruation is difficult for girls. But by knowing the meaning of things and by taking care of themselves, they need not be seriously troubled by it. Every once in a while as they are growing up, but before they are old enough to really fall in love and marry and have children, boys feel a sort of stirring of the sex organs—sometimes so much so that it makes them quite uneasy and anxious for relief. The thing to do is to keep as calm as possible and keep very busy and very healthy. Then the discomfort will not be too great, and nature will usually bring relief by letting the accumulated semen pass off during sleep. This is called a seminal emission, and is perfectly harmless. Sometimes a vivid sexual dream comes with it, but that too will do no harm, unless a boy lets his mind dwell on it till the excitement grows unnatural. This emission may happen every two weeks or so, but it is not a regular thing. Boys are sometimes alarmed and fear their sex machinery is out of order, but it is a perfectly natural thing, and only means that the organs are relieving themselves of the extra secretions that are not needed till the time comes for the real sex relation.

Boys and girls sometimes get the habit of handling their sex organs so as to get them excited. This is called masturbation or self-abuse. It is also called auto-erotism. Such handling can be made to result in a climax something like that of the natural sex act. For generations this habit has been considered wrong and dangerous, but recently many of the best scientists have concluded that the chief harm has come from the worry caused by doing it, when one

believed it to be wrong. This worry has often been so great that real illness, both of the mind and body has resulted. There is no occasion for worry unless the habit is carried to excess. But remember that until you are mature, the sex secretions are specially needed within your body, and if you use them wastefully before you are grown, you are depriving your body of what it needs. So do not stimulate your sex organs into action *intentionally*. And do not yield to the impulse to handle the sex organs in order to relieve the pressure which may occasionally feel overwhelming, unless you find that nature does not bring you relief during sleep.

Remember always that your whole sex machinery is more easily put out of order than any other part of your body, and it must be treated with great care and respect all along. It is not fair to ourselves or to each other to do a single thing that will make us either weak or unnatural. Remember that your sex organs have a very powerful, even if invisible, effect upon your whole being, and up to the time that you are really old enough to love some one to whom you want to actually belong, you must *let your sex machinery* grow strong and ready for its good, happy work when the right time comes. The sex organs during your youth do not need frequent exercise in the same sense that your muscles do. They are active all the time with their internal secretions which strengthen both you and them.

Don't ever let any one drag you into nasty talk or thought about sex. It is *not* a nasty subject. It should mean everything that is highest and best and happiest in human life, but it can be easily perverted and ruined and made the cause of horrible suffering of both mind and body.

There are two very terrible sexual diseases—syphilis and gonorrhea. They are both frightfully infectious and very difficult to cure. These diseases are usually acquired by sex contact with a diseased person, but they can also be gotten by using public drinking cups, towels, water-closets, or in any way by which an infected moist article can come in contact with one's skin. The worst thing about these diseases is that they are such invisible enemies. After the outside appearance of the disease is gone, they often go reaching farther and farther into the body, making awful results that hang on for years. Men who get diseased frequently give the infection to their wives, often causing them to be so ill that surgical operations are necessary, by which their sex organs are so crippled that they can never be mothers; and, worst of all, innocent unborn babies are infected and come into the world sick or deformed or blind.

Men often get these dreadful diseases by having sex relations with women who are called prostitutes or “bad women,” that is, they are women who are not in love with any one, but who make money by selling their sex relations to men who pay for them. Many prostitutes become diseased, and there is, as yet, no way for either them or the men who visit them to be

positively safe from infection. But the doctors are making progress in their study of these diseases, and they are finding out how to control and cure them, just as they have in the case of tuberculosis.

But even if presently these venereal diseases, as they are called, can be entirely cured and prevented, prostitution will still remain a thing to hate. For the idea of sex relations between people who do not love each other, who do not feel any sense of belonging to each other, will always be revolting to highly developed, sensitive people.

People's lives grow finer and their characters better, if they have sex relations only with those they love. And those who make the wretched mistake of yielding to the sex impulse alone when there is no love to go with it, usually live to despise themselves for their weakness and their bad taste. They are always ashamed of doing it, and they try to keep it secret from their families and those they respect. You can be sure that whatever people are ashamed to do is something that can never bring them real happiness. It is true that one's sex relations are the most personal and private matters in the world, and they belong just to us and to no one else, but while we may be shy and reserved about them, *we are not ashamed*.

When two people really love each other, they don't care who knows it. They are proud of their happiness. But no man is ever proud of his connection with a prostitute and no prostitute is ever proud of her business.

Sex relations belong to love, and love is never a *business*. Love is the nicest thing in the world, but it can't be bought. And the sex side of it is the biggest and most important side of it, so it is the one side of us that we must be absolutely sure to keep in good order and perfect health, if we are going to be happy ourselves or make any one else happy.