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THE EROTIC RIGHTS OF WOMEN,

—AND—

THE OBJECTS OF MARRIAGE

— Two Essays by —
HAVELOCK ELLIS.

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THE EROTIC RIGHTS
— OF WOMEN. —

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THE EROTIC RIGHTS OF WOMEN.



WHAT is the part of woman, one is sometimes asked, in the sex act? Must it be the wife's concern in the marital embrace to sacrifice her own wishes from a sense of love and duty towards her husband? Or is the wife entitled to an equal mutual interest and joy in this act with her husband? It seems a simple problem. In so fundamental a relationship, which goes back to the beginning of sex in the dawn of life, it might appear that we could leave Nature to decide. Yet it is not so. Throughout the history of civilization, wherever we can trace the feelings and ideas which have prevailed on this matter and the resultant conduct, the problem has existed, often to produce discord, conflict, and misery. The problem still exists to-day and with as important results as in the past.

In Nature, before the arrival of Man, it can scarcely be said, indeed, that any difficulty existed. It was taken for granted at that time that the female had both the right to her own body, and the right to a certain amount of enjoyment in the use of it. It often cost the male a serious amount of trouble—though he never failed to find it worth while—to explain to her the point where he might be allowed to come in, and to persuade her that he could contribute to her enjoyment. This is generally the case throughout Nature, before we reach Man, and, though it is not invariably obvious, we often find it even among the unlikeliest animals.

As is well known, it is most pronounced among the birds, who have in some species carried the love art—and the faithful devotion which properly accompanies the love art as being an essential part

of it—to the highest point. We have here the great natural fact of courtship. Throughout Nature, wherever we meet with animals of a high type, often indeed when they are of a lowly type—provided they have not been rendered unnatural by domestication—every act of sexual union is preceded by a process of courtship. There is a sound physiological reason for this courtship, for in the act of wooing and being wooed the psychic excitement gradually generated in the brains of the two partners acts as a stimulant to arouse into full activity the mechanism which ensures sexual union and aids ultimate impregnation. Such courtship is thus a fundamental natural fact.

It is as a natural fact that we still find it in full development among a large number of peoples of the lower races whom we are accustomed to regard as more primitive than ourselves. New conditions, it is true, soon enter to complicate the picture presented by savage courtship. The economic element of bargaining, destined to prove so important, comes in at an early stage. And among peoples leading a violent life, and constantly fighting, it has sometimes happened, though not always, that courtship also has been violent. This is not so frequent as was once supposed. With better knowledge it was found that the seeming brutality once thought to take the place of courtship among various peoples in a low state of culture was really itself courtship, a rough kind of play agreeable to both parties and not depriving the feminine partner of her own freedom of choice.

This was notably the case as regards so-called "marriage by capture." While this is sometimes a real capture, it is more often a mock capture; the lover perhaps pursues the beloved on horseback, but she is as fleet and as skilful as he is, cannot be captured unless she wishes to be captured, and in addition, as among the Kirghiz, she may be armed with a formidable whip; so that "marriage by capture," far from being a hardship imposed on women, is largely a concession to their modesty and a gratification of their erotic impulses. Even when the chief part of the decision rests with masculine force, courtship is still not necessarily or usually excluded, for the exhibition of force by a lover—and this is true for civilized as well as for savage women—is itself a source of pleasurable stimulation, and when that is the case the ends of courtship may be attained even more successfully by the forceful than by the humble lover.

The evolution of society, however, tended to overlay and sometimes even to suppress these fundamental natural tendencies. The position of the man as the sole and uncontested head of the family, the insistence on paternity and male descent, the accompanying economic developments and the tendency to view a woman less as a self-disposing individual than as an object of barter belonging to her father, the consequent rigidity of the marriage bond and the stern insistence on wifely fidelity—all these conditions of developing civilization, while still leaving courtship possible, diminished its significance and even abolished its necessity. Moreover, on the basis of the social, economic, and legal development thus established, new moral, spiritual, and religious forces were slowly generated, which worked on these rules of merely exterior order, and interiorized them, thus giving them power over the souls as well as over the bodies of women.

The result was that, directly and indirectly, the legal, economic, and love rights of women were all diminished. It is with the love or erotic rights only that we are here concerned.

No doubt, in its erotic aspects, as well as in its legal and economic aspects, the social order thus established was described, and in good faith, as beneficial to women, and even as maintained in their interests. Monogamy and the home, it was claimed, alike existed for the benefit and protection of women. It was not so often explained that they greatly benefited and protected men, with, moreover, this additional advantage that while women were absolutely confined to the home, men were free to exercise their activities outside the home, even, with tacit general consent, on the erotic side.

Whatever the real benefits, and there is no occasion for questioning them, of the sexual order thus established, it becomes clear that in certain important respects it had an unnatural and repressive influence on the erotic aspect of woman's sexual life. It fostered the reproductive side of woman's sexual life, but it rendered difficult for her the satisfaction of the instinct for that courtship which is the natural preliminary of reproductive activity, an instinct even more highly developed in the female than in the male, and the more insistent because in the order of Nature the burden of maternity is preceded by the reward of pleasure.

But the marriage order which had become established led to

the indirect result of banning pleasure in women, or at all events in wives. It was regarded as too dangerous, and even as degrading. The women who wanted pleasure were not considered fit for the home, but more suited to be devoted to an exclusive "life of pleasure," which soon turned out to be not their own pleasure but men's. A "life of pleasure," in that sense or in any other sense, was not what more than a small minority of women ever desired. The desire of women for courtship is not a thing by itself, and was not implanted for gratification by itself. It is naturally intertwined—and to a much greater degree than the corresponding desire in men—with her deepest personal, family, and social instincts, so that if these are desecrated and lost its charm soon fades.

The practices and the ideals of this established morality were both due to men, and both were so thoroughly fashioned that they subjugated alike the actions and the feelings of women. There is no sphere which we regard as so peculiarly women's sphere as that of love. Yet there is no sphere which in civilization women have so far had so small a part in regulating. Their deepest impulses—their modesty, their maternity, their devotion, their emotional receptivity—were used, with no conscious and deliberate Machiavellism, against themselves to mould a moral world for their habitation which they would not themselves have moulded. It is not of modern creation, nor by any means due, as some have supposed, to the asceticism of Christianity, however much Christianity may have reinforced it. Indeed, one may say that in the course of time Christianity had an influence in weakening it, for Christianity discovered a new reservoir of tender emotion, and such emotion may be transferred, and, as a matter of fact, was transferred, from its first religious channel into erotic channels which were thereby deepened and extended, and without reference to any design of Christianity. For the ends we achieve are often by no means those which we set out to accomplish.

In ancient classic days this moral order was even more severely established than in the Middle Ages. Montaigne, in the sixteenth century, declared that "marriage is a devout and religious relationship, the pleasures derived from it should be restrained and serious, mixed with some severity." But in this matter he was not merely expressing the Christian standpoint, but even more that of paganism, and he thoroughly agreed with the old Greek moralist that a man should approach his wife "prudently and severely" for fear of inciting her to lasciviousness; he thought that marriage was best

arranged by a third party, and was inclined to think, with the ancients, that women are not fitted to make friends of. Montaigne has elsewhere spoken with insight of women's instinctive knowledge of the art and discipline of love, and has pointed out how men have imposed their own ideals and rules of action on women from whom they have demanded opposite and contradictory virtues; yet, we see, he approves of this state of things and never suggests that women have any right to opinions of their own or feelings of their own when the sacred institution of marriage is in question.

Montaigne represents the more exalted aspects of the Pagan-Christian conception of morality in marriage which still largely prevails. But that conception lent itself to deductions, frankly accepted even by Montaigne himself, which were by no means exalted. "I find," said Montaigne, "that Venus, after all, is nothing more than the pleasure of discharging our vessels, just as Nature renders pleasurable the discharges from other parts." Sir Thomas More among Catholics, and Luther among Protestants, said exactly the same thing in other and even clearer words, while untold millions of husbands in Christendom down to to-day, whether or not they have had the wit to put their theory into a phrase, have regularly put it into practice, at all events within the consecrated pale of marriage, and treated their wives, "severely and prudently," as convenient utensils for the reception of a natural excretion.

Obviously, in this view of marriage, sexual activity was regarded as an exclusively masculine function, in the exercise of which women had merely a passive part to play. Any active participation on her side thus seemed unnecessary, and even unbecoming, finally, though only in comparatively modern times, disgusting and actually degrading. Thus Acton, who was regarded half a century ago as the chief English authority on sexual matters, declared that "happily for society" the supposition that women possess sexual feelings could be put aside as "a vile aspersion," while another medical authority of the same period stated in regard to the most simple physical sign of healthy sexual emotion that it "only happens in lascivious women."

This final triumph of the masculine ideals and rule of life was, however, only achieved slowly. It was the culmination of an elaborate process of training. At the outset men had found it impossible to speak too strongly of the "wantonness" of women.

This attitude was pronounced among the ancient Greeks and prominent in their dramatists. Christianity again, which ended by making women into the chief pillars of the Church, began by regarding them as the "Gate of Hell." Again, later, when in the Middle Ages this masculine moral order approached the task of subjugating the barbarians of Northern Europe, men were horrified at the licentiousness of those northern women at whose coldness they are now shocked.

That, indeed, was, as Montaigne had seen, the central core of conflict in the rule of life imposed by men on women. Men were perpetually striving, by ways the most methodical, the most subtle, the most far-reaching, to achieve a result in women, which, when achieved, men themselves viewed with dismay. They may be said to be moved in this sphere by two passions, the passion for virtue and the passion for vice. But it so happens that both these streams of passion have to be directed at the same fascinating object: Woman. No doubt nothing is more admirable than the skill with which women have acquired the duplicity necessary to play the two contradictory parts thus imposed upon them. But in that requirement the play of their natural reactions tended to become paralyzed, and the delicate mechanism of their instincts often disturbed.

They were forbidden, except in a few carefully etiquetted forms, the free play of courtship without which they could not perform their part in the love life with full satisfaction to themselves or their partners. They were reduced to an artificial simulation of coldness or of warmth, according to the particular stage of the dominating masculine ideal of woman which their partner chanced to have reached. But that is an attitude equally unsatisfactory to themselves or to their lovers, even when the latter have not sufficient insight to see through its unreality. It is an attitude so unnatural and artificial that it inevitably tends to produce a real coldness which nothing can disguise.

It is true that women whose instincts are not perverted at the roots do not desire to be cold. Far from it. But to dispel that coldness the right atmosphere is needed, and the insight and skill of the right man. In the erotic sphere a woman asks nothing better of a man than to be lifted above her coldness, to the higher plane where there is reciprocal interest and mutual joy in the act of love. Therein her silent demand is one with Nature's. For the biological

order of the world involves those claims which, in the human range, are the love rights of women.

The social claims of women, their economic claims, their political claims, have long been before the world. Women themselves have actively asserted them, and they are all in process of realization. The love claims of women, which are at least as fundamental, are not publicly voiced, and women themselves would be the last to assert them. It is easy to understand why that should be so. The natural and acquired qualities of women, even the qualities developed in the art of courtship, have all been utilized in building up the masculine ideal of sexual morality; it is on feminine characteristics that this masculine ideal has been based, so that women have been helpless to protest against it. Moreover, even if that were not so, to formulate such rights is to raise the question whether there so much as exists anything that can be called "love rights." The right to joy cannot be claimed in the same way as one claims the right to put a voting paper in a ballot box. A human being's love aptitudes can only be developed where the right atmosphere for them exists, and where the attitudes of both persons concerned are in harmonious sympathy. That is why the erotic rights of woman have been the last of all to be attained.

Yet to-day we see a change here. The change required is, it has been said, a change of attitude and a resultant change in the atmosphere in which the sexual impulses are manifested. It involves no necessary change in the external order of our marriage system; for, as has already been pointed out, it was a coincident, and not designed, part of that order. Various recent lines of tendency have converged to produce this change of attitude and of atmosphere.

In part, the men of to-day are far more ready than the men of former days to look upon women as their comrades in the every-day work of the world, instead of as beings who were ideally on a level above themselves and practically on a level considerably below themselves. In part, there is the growing recognition that women have conquered many elementary human rights of which before they were deprived, and are more and more taking the position of citizens, with the same kinds of duties, privileges, and responsibilities as men. In part, also, it may be added, there is a growing diffusion among educated people of a knowledge of the primary

facts of life in the two sexes, slowly dissipating and dissolving many foolish and often mischievous superstitions.

The result is that, as many competent observers have noted, the young men of to-day show a new attitude towards women and towards marriage, an attitude of simplicity and frankness, a desire for mutual confidence, a readiness to discuss difficulties, an appeal to understand and to be understood. Such an attitude, which had hitherto been hard to attain, at once creates the atmosphere in which alone the free spontaneous erotic activities of women can breathe and live.

This consummation, we have seen, may be regarded as the attainment of certain rights, the corollary of other rights in the social field which women are slowly achieving as human beings on the same human level as men. It opens to women, on whom is always laid the chief burden of sex, the right to the joy and exaltation of sex, to the uplifting of the soul which, when the right conditions are fulfilled, is the outcome of the intimate approach and union of two human beings. Yet while we may find convenient so to formulate it, we need to remember that that is only a fashion of speech, for there are no rights in Nature. If we take a broader sweep, what we may choose to call an erotic right is simply the perfect poise of the conflicting forces of life, the rhythmic harmony in which generation is achieved with the highest degree of perfection compatible with the make of the world.

It is our part to transform Nature's large conception into our own smaller organic mould, not otherwise than the plants, to whom we are far back akin, who dig their flexible roots deep into the moist and fruitful earth, and so are able to lift up glorious heads towards the sky.

THE OBJECTS
OF MARRIAGE.

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WHAT are the legitimate objects of marriage? We know that many people seek to marry for ends that can scarcely be called legitimate, that men may marry to obtain a cheap domestic drudge or nurse, and that women may marry to be kept when they are tired of keeping themselves. These objects in marriage may or may not be moral, but in any case they are scarcely its legitimate ends. We are here concerned to ascertain those ends of marriage which are legitimate when we take the highest ground as moral and civilized men and women living in an advanced state of society and seeking, if we can, to advance that state of society still further.

The primary end of marriage is to beget and bear offspring, and to rear them until they are able to take care of themselves. On that basis Man is at one with all the mammals and most of the birds. If, indeed, we disregard the originally less essential part of this end—that is to say, the care and tending of the young—this end of marriage is not only the primary but usually the sole end of sexual intercourse in the whole mammal world. As a natural instinct, its achievement involves gratification and well-being, but this bait of gratification is merely a device of Nature's and not in itself an end having any useful function at the periods when conception is not possible. This is clearly indicated by the fact that among animals the female only experiences sexual desire at

the season of impregnation, and that desire ceases as soon as impregnation takes place, though this is only in a few species true of the male, obviously because, if his sexual desire and aptitude were confined to so brief a period, the chances of the female meeting the right male at the right moment would be too seriously diminished; so that the attentive and inquisitive attitude towards the female by the male animal—which we may often think we see still traceable in the human species—is not the outcome of lustfulness for personal gratification (“wantonly to satisfy carnal lusts and appetites like brute beasts,” as the Anglican Prayer Book incorrectly puts it) but implanted by Nature for the benefit of the female and the attainment of the primary object of procreation. This primary object we may term the animal end of marriage.

This object remains not only the primary but even the sole end of marriage among the lower races of mankind generally. The erotic idea, in its deeper sense, that is to say the element of love, arose very slowly in mankind. It is found, it is true, among some lower races, and it appears that some tribes possess a word for the joy of love in a purely psychic sense. But even among European races the evolution was late. The Greek poets, except the latest, showed little recognition of love as an element of marriage. Theognis compared marriage with cattle-breeding. The Romans of the Republic took much the same view. Greeks and Romans alike regarded breeding as the one recognizable object of marriage; any other object was mere wantonness and had better, they thought, be carried on outside marriage. Religion, which preserves so many ancient and primitive conceptions of life, has consecrated this conception also, and Christianity—though, as I will point out later, it has tended to enlarge the conception—at the outset only offered the choice between celibacy on the one hand and on the other marriage for the production of offspring.

Yet, from an early period in human history, a secondary function of sexual intercourse had been slowly growing up to become one of the great objects of marriage. Among animals, it may be said, and even sometimes in man, the sexual impulse, when once aroused, makes but a short and swift circuit through the brain to reach its consummation. But as the brain and its faculties develop, powerfully aided indeed by the very difficulties of the sexual life, the impulse for sexual union has to traverse ever longer, slower, more painful paths, before it reaches—and sometimes it never reaches—its ultimate object. This means that sex gradually

becomes intertwined with all the highest and subtlest human emotions and activities, with the refinements of social intercourse, with high adventure in every sphere, with art, with religion. The primitive animal instinct, having the sole end of procreation, becomes on its way to that end the inspiring stimulus to all those psychic energies which in civilization we count most precious. This function is thus, we see, a by-product. But, as we know, even in our human factories, the by-product is sometimes more valuable even than the product. That is so as regards the functional products of human evolution. The hand was produced out of the animal fore-limb with the primary end of grasping the things we materially need, but as a by-product the hand has developed the function of making and playing the piano and the violin, and that secondary functional by-product of the hand we account, even as measured by the rough test of money, more precious, however less materially necessary, than its primary function. It is, however, only in rare and gifted natures that transformed sexual energy becomes of supreme value for its own sake without ever attaining the normal physical outlet. For the most part the by-product accompanies the product, throughout, thus adding a secondary, yet peculiarly sacred and specially human, object of marriage to its primary animal object. This may be termed the spiritual object of marriage.

By the term “spiritual” we are not to understand any mysterious and supernatural qualities. It is simply a convenient name, in distinction from animal, to cover all those higher mental and emotional processes which in human evolution are ever gaining greater power. It is needless to enumerate the constituents of this spiritual end of sexual intercourse, for everyone is entitled to enumerate them differently and in different order. They include not only all that makes love a gracious and beautiful erotic art, but the whole element of pleasure in so far as pleasure is more than a mere animal gratification. Our ancient ascetic traditions often make us blind to the meaning of pleasure. We see only its possibilities of evil and not its mightiness for good. We forget that, as Romain Rolland says, “Joy is as holy as Pain.” No one has insisted so much on the supreme importance of the element of pleasure in the spiritual ends of sex as James Hinton. Rightly used, he declares, Pleasure is “the Child of God,” to be recognized as a “mighty storehouse of force,” and he pointed out the significant fact that in the course of human progress its importance increases rather than diminishes. While it is perfectly true that sexual energy may be in large degree arrested, and transformed into

intellectual and moral forms, yet it is also true that pleasure itself, and above all, sexual pleasure, wisely used and not abused, may prove the stimulus and liberator of our finest and most exalted activities. It is largely this remarkable function of sexual pleasure which is decisive in settling the argument of those who claim that continence is the only alternative to the animal end of marriage. That argument ignores the liberating and harmonising influences, giving wholesome balance and sanity to the whole organism, imparted by a sexual union which is the outcome of the psychic as well as physical needs. There is, further, in the attainment of the spiritual end of marriage, much more than the benefit of each individual separately. There is, that is to say, the effect on the union itself. For through harmonious sex relationships a deeper spiritual unity is reached than can possibly be derived from continence in or out of marriage, and the marriage association becomes an apter instrument in the service of the world. Apart from any sexual craving, the complete spiritual contact of two persons who love each other can only be attained through some act of rare intimacy. No act can be quite so intimate as the sexual embrace. In its accomplishment, for all spiritually evolved persons, the communion of bodies becomes the communion of souls. The outward and visible sign has been the consummation of an inward and spiritual grace. "I would base all my sex teaching to children and young people on the beauty and sacredness of sex," writes a distinguished woman of to-day; "sex intercourse is the great sacrament of life, he that eateth and drinketh unworthily eateth and drinketh his own damnation; but it may be the most beautiful sacrament between two souls who have no thought of children." To many the idea of a sacrament seems merely ecclesiastical, but that is a misunderstanding. The word "sacrament" is the ancient Roman name of a soldier's oath of military allegiance, and the idea, in the deeper sense, existed long before Christianity, and has ever been regarded as the physical sign of the closest possible union with some great spiritual reality. From our modern standpoint we may say, with James Hinton, that the sexual embrace, worthily understood, can only be compared with music and with prayer. "Every true lover," it has been well said by a woman, "knows this, and the worth of any and every relationship can be judged by its success in reaching, or failing to reach, this standpoint."

I have mentioned how the Church—in part influenced by that clinging to primitive conceptions which always marks religions and in part by its ancient traditions of asceticism—tended to insist

mainly, if not exclusively, on the animal object of marriage. It sought to reduce sex to a minimum because the pagans magnified sex; it banned pleasure because the Christian's path on earth was the way of the Cross; and though theologians accepted the idea of a "Sacrament of Nature" they could only allow it to operate when the active interference of the priest was impossible, though it must in justice be said that, before the Council of Trent, the Western Church recognised that the sacrament of marriage was effected entirely by the act of the two celebrants themselves and not by the priest. Gradually, however, a more reasonable and humane opinion crept into the Church. Intercourse outside the animal end of marriage was indeed a sin, but it became merely a venial sin. The great influence of St. Augustine was on the side of allowing much freedom to intercourse outside the aim of procreation. At the Reformation, John à Lasco, a Catholic Bishop who became a Protestant and settled in England, laid it down, following various earlier theologians, that the object of marriage, besides offspring, was to serve as a "sacrament of consolation" to the united couple, and that view was more or less accepted by the founders of the Protestant churches. It is the generally accepted Protestant view to-day.* The importance of the spiritual end of intercourse in marriage, alike for the higher development of each member of the couple and for the intimacy and stability of their union, is still more emphatically set forth by the more advanced thinkers of to-day.

There is something pathetic in the spectacle of those among us who are still only able to recognize the animal end of marriage, and who point to the example of the lower animals—among whom the biological conditions are entirely different—as worthy of our imitation. It has taken God—or Nature, if we will—unknown millions of years of painful struggle to evolve Man, and to raise the human species above that helpless bondage to reproduction which marks the lower animals. But on these people it has all been wasted. They are at the animal stage still. They have yet to learn the A. B. C. of love. A representative of these people in the person of an Anglican bishop, the Bishop of Southwark, appeared as a witness before the National Birth-Rate Commission which, a few years ago, met in London to investigate the decline of the birth-rate. He declared that procreation is the sole legitimate object of marriage and that intercourse for any other end was a

* It is well set forth by the Rev. H. Northcote in his excellent book, *Christianity and Sex Problems*.

degrading act of mere "self-gratification." This declaration had the interesting result of evoking the comments of many members of the Commission, formed of representative men and women with various standpoints—Protestant, Catholic, and other—and it is notable that while not one identified himself with the Bishop's opinion, several decisively opposed that opinion, as contrary to the best beliefs of both ancient and modern times, as representing a low and not a high moral standpoint, and as involving the notion that the whole sexual activity of an individual should be reduced to perhaps two or three effective acts of intercourse in a lifetime. Such a notion obviously cannot be carried into general practice, putting aside the question as to whether it would be desirable, and it may be added that it would have the further result of shutting out from the life of love altogether all those persons who, for whatever reason, feel that it is their duty to refrain from having children at all. It is the attitude of a handful of Pharisees seeking to thrust the bulk of mankind into Hell. All this confusion and evil comes of the blindness which cannot know that, beyond the primary animal end of propagation in marriage, there is a secondary but more exalted spiritual end.

It is needless to insist how intimately that secondary end of marriage is bound up with the practice of birth control. Without birth control, indeed, it could frequently have no existence at all, and even at the best seldom be free from disconcerting possibilities fatal to its very essence. Against these disconcerting possibilities is often placed, on the other side, the un-æsthetic nature of the contraceptives associated with birth control. Yet, it must be remembered, they are of a part with the whole of our civilised human life. We at no point enter the spiritual save through the material. Forel has in this connection compared the use of contraceptives to the use of eye-glasses. Eye-glasses are equally un-æsthetic, yet they are devices, based on Nature, wherewith to supplement the deficiencies of Nature. However in themselves un-æsthetic, for those who need them they make the æsthetic possible. Eye-glasses and contraceptives alike are a portal to the spiritual world for many who, without them, would find that world largely a closed book.

Birth-control is effecting, and promising to effect, many functions in our social life. By furnishing the means to limit the size of families, which would otherwise be excessive, it confers the greatest benefit on the family and especially on the mother. By rendering easily possible a selection in parentage and the choice of

the right time and circumstances for conception it is again, the chief key to the eugenic improvement of the race. There are many other benefits, as is now generally becoming clear, which will be derived from the rightly applied practice of birth control. To many of us it is not the least of these that birth control effects finally the complete liberation of the spiritual object of marriage.

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