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Liberty and Democracy

By F. W. Stella Browne

EDWARD CARPENTER'S LESSON to the world today, is to a peculiar degree, the direct expression of his own personality, as revealed in the art of life, as well as in literature. I think none among our greatest, teaches and helps us with such an intimate and individual touch, while his versatility appeals to an unusually varied collection of human types.

His social message is unmistakably definite and fundamental: it is a message of sincerity (in Carlyle's phrase, *veracity*) and spontaneity, and it also includes a gracious balance and proportion, a fine discrimination between essentials and non-essentials, an equipoise of individual and social rights, of body, mind and spirit.

Perhaps to the general public, Edward Carpenter is best known as the practical as well as theoretical, exponent of real and wholesome simplification of life, with its inestimable economy of time, energy and material resources. A real simplification, this: not the timidly pretentious affectation which H. S. Salt has so effectively scourged, in a recent criticism of Thoreau's critics. And an æsthetic and humorous simplification, not a mania for self-mortification, or a positively perverted relish in squalor and torment, such as has unquestionably animated certain ascetics, Christian and other. No: (I quote H. S. Salt) it is "the triumph of genuine taste over traditional habit." Its success is manifest in Carpenter's intellectual clarity and alertness, and the capacity for sustained and varied effort, which carries him through such an astonishing number of beneficent activities.

Carpenter has not only despised humbug and the "upholstery" and noxious paraphernalia of useless material which clogs and poisons *living*: he has *renounced* them. He has given a wonderful demonstration of the possibilities of wholesomeness, refinement and efficiency in the art of Household Management, which are being developed and adapted to social needs, in many modest yet determined co-operative and communal experiments.

SIMPLICITY OF LIFE goes hand in hand with labor. Carpenter devoted himself at an age (39) when many men have become impervious to fresh ideas and habits, to acquiring skill at market-gardening and manual work, in close contact with the primitive life of the soil and weather. He has told us, how his great poem "Towards Democracy" was written in the open air; this influence pervades all his work, e. g., the wholesomeness and genuine sense of wonder and space.

Of Labor itself,

"which is our daily death
and resurrection, in the thing created."

he has spoken excellently. He has emphasized the need for variety of occupation; for something harmonious as well as arduous, something personally expressive and socially useful.

revolt against a *superficially rationalized and intellectualized life*; this reaction is shown most significantly too, in his treatment of all psychic and emotional problems—in his pre-occupation with the two great "imponderables" religion and love.

A born psychic,—(however little his early training and environment permitted this faculty to develop)—he knows the value of the *intuition* which most men ignore and depreciate.

He says:

"Do not pay too much attention to the wandering lunatic Mind.

"When you have trained it, informed it, made it clear, decisive, and your flexible instrument and tool,

"Why, do not then reverse the order, and become the mere fatuous attendant and exhibitor of its acrobatic feats, like a keeper who shows off a monkey."

("Towards Democracy" Part IV)

A hard saying? Perhaps. And liable to misinterpretation and abuse? Yet, what empty academic shows and exercises, what pompous, pinched, eviscerated humanity, in wigs, robes and all the paraphernalia of authority, must have prompted Carpenter's reflexion!

THE PORTION OF his delightful autobiography "*My Days and Dreams*," dealing with his experiences at Cambridge, is an invaluable commentary on this poem, and his whole attitude respecting education and religion.

Carpenter is a student of the emotional life and nature of humanity; and an untiring and most redoubtable champion of the right of the emotions to recognition and development in any sane social order. He has an intuitive understanding of, and sympathy with the wilder and more primitive manifestations of wonder, awe, and love: he is anxious to understand rather than to *condemn*. He has studied love's social value as well as the huge gamut of its individual variations. The essays on the relations of the sexes, in "*Love's Coming of Age*" are equally balanced and profound. In "*Towards Democracy*" are some of the most beautiful love poems ever written: for instance:

"*Who shall command the Heart*" with its amazing imagery:
who chained Thee in This body?

who muzzled thee, to drive

"this crank machine,

"Thou wanderer of the woods,

"Thou crimson leopard,

"No better than a turnspit?"

And throughout his work, he grasps and portrays love's infinite plasticity as well as its basic power.

The neglect of any humane understanding and expansion of emotional possibilities in our system of education, (as well

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ly exposed long ago, by Carpenter. Our present society in which many restrictions, ideas and prohibitions have become meaningless, and therefore obsolete, still refuses any adequate *readjustment* of its laws, to meet realities; it wastes its manhood and womanhood, as it starves and stunts its babies—but it must recognize that “sincere love is, as we have said, a real fact and its own justification and that however various or anomalous or unusual may be the circumstances and combinations under which it appears, it demands and has to be treated by Society with the utmost respect and reverence.”

The student and seer who has made that great neglected truth more apparent—even if he had done nothing else—has thereby achieved an inestimable contribution to human happiness and evolution. He has helped towards the realization of that Freedom which “has to be won afresh every morning.” He is one of those “who dream the impossible dream, and it comes true; who dream the dream which all men always declare futile, who dream the hour which is not yet on earth, and lo! it strikes.”