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Wilhelm Stekel

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THE SEXUAL ROOT OF KLEPTOMANIA.¹

DR. WILHELM STEKEL.

In the *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft* (Verlag Georg H. Wigand, Leipzig), Dr. Wilhelm Stekel, the eminent Viennese psycho-therapist and one of the most able representatives of the Freud school, deals with kleptomania and reaches conclusions which should be particularly interesting here in America, where the great department stores offer such a rich field of labor, not only to the ordinary thief, but also to the kleptomaniac. Of course, Dr. Stekel by no means asserts that his work has solved the problem of kleptomania once for all. The results that he has so far obtained seem, however, to form the principle of a new conception of kleptomania which he will undoubtedly further develop in his forthcoming work, *Die Sprache des Traumes*, which is based on the criminal element in man.

The fact that rich, or at least well-to-do, women are sometimes guilty of theft in the big department stores has always received a certain amount of attention. *Duboisson* has recently given an exhaustive description of this monomania under the name of "magasinitis." Before that a number of interesting cases, nearly all of which exhibit one and the same psychic mechanism, were communicated by Bontemps (*Du vol dans les grands magasins*), Lasegue (*Le vol aux étalages*), and Letulle (*Voieuses honnettes*). In each case the woman declared that some unknown power had suddenly compelled her to touch some object and *put it in her pocket*. Afterwards, with some women amnesia exists; others are terribly ashamed and regret their act; many do not even touch the stolen object again. The choice of objects is very interesting. Generally they are trifles: bits of lace, gloves, a small note-book, pencils, etc. In some cases a certain superficial motive can be traced. A well-to-do woman whose child is ill steals a doll. This is more comprehensible than that a countess should steal lace (Letulle). The latter thus describes her action: "Il m'est impossible de dire ce qui c'est passé en moi; la tentation a été plus forte que moi! Je ne sais pas ce qui c'est produit. Mais je pris cet objet et je l'ai caché!"

It thus appears that we have to deal with the *temptation* to commit

¹"This paper is an abridgment, by Mr. Adalbert Albrecht, of Dr. Stekel's article in the *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft*." Not only lack of space prevents our publishing the whole, but also the impossibility of translating certain of the author's "association experiments" into English.

a sin. As Dr. Stekel has repeatedly proved to himself by psycho-analysis, the root of all these cases of kleptomania is ungratified sexual instinct. These women fight against temptation. They are engaged in a constant struggle with their desires. They would like to do what is forbidden, but they lack the strength. Theft is to them a symbolic act.² The essential point is that they do something that is forbidden, *touch* something that does not belong to them. Dr. Otto Gross's suggestive work, *Das Freudsche Ideogenitätsmoment und seine Bedeutung im manisch-depressiven Irresein Kraepelins* (Leipzig, F. C. Vogel, 1907), contains a careful analysis of a case of kleptomania in a patient who was suffering from melancholy mania.

The person in question was a young girl of healthy family, without inherited defects, who sustained an injury to the head in her seventeenth year and was later subject to fainting and periodical fits of depression and excitability. After a time she suffered from irresistible attacks of kleptomania. She said, "At that time I could not see anything lying anywhere; without any reason I was compelled to take the objects. They were not things that pleased me particularly; I had to take them, I had no peace until I did." For four years the patient had maintained intimate relations with a sexually impotent man. When he finally regained his generative power and she found herself pregnant, her impulse to steal disappeared. (She no longer needed to take something that did not belong to her.) The question put to her by a confessor, who examined her in regard to her sexual experiences, whether she had taken the penis in her hand and introduced it herself, made a particular impression on her. The number of objects stolen was very large: stockings, furs, gloves, little bags, bracelets, rings, umbrellas, etc. Whoever has occupied him-

²One of the greatest services that Professor Freud has rendered is to have pointed out the "sexual symbolism" in man. His critics, it is true, still scorn to study seriously this symbolism and its nature. They believe that it can be voluntarily fabricated and consciously produced. But Freud's writings show that it is rooted in the sub-conscious mind. Whenever the control of consciousness is partly or altogether suspended—hence in sleep, in a drowsy condition, when the attention is distracted—suppressed and superseded notions and images rise to the surface. They appear, however, in a disguised form; that is, they are expressed or clothed in symbolic terms. Those philologists who have studied the psychology of language also agree with this view. Kleinpaul, for instance, says frankly, "man sexualizes the universe," that is, imbues it with sexual symbols. "But symbols are not made, they already exist; they are not invented, but only recognized" (Kleinpaul). According to Bleuler, symbolism is based on a lower form of associative activity, which, instead of logical concatenation, possesses only vague analogies. We are not capable of this kind of associative activity as long as we are fully conscious and our attention is alive. Hence this symbolism cannot be voluntarily fabricated. It is our firm conviction that criminal psychology may obtain from Freud's discoveries the most stimulating suggestions, and we hope that his theories and conclusions will be received with less prejudice here in America than they have encountered in Europe.

THE SEXUAL ROOT OF KLEPTOMANIA

self with psycho-analysis will recognize at once that these things have a pronounced symbolic sexual significance. (A little bag, a ring, a bracelet, furs, stockings, gloves are all articles into which we put something; umbrella is a frequently recurring symbol for penis, probably because opening it suggests erection.)

In his psycho-analysis, Gross at once recognizes the sexual root of this case of kleptomania. The patient is moved "*to do something forbidden, secretly*, or, more clearly expressed, *to take something forbidden, secretly.*" (Compare the question in the confessional, whether she had "*taken the penis in her hand.*") Gross remarks, "thus the origin of the symptom of kleptomania is laid bare: 'to take something forbidden, secretly,' is common to both motives, to the sexual desire and to the impulse to steal; this association causes the emotional energy of the unconscious sexual motive to be transferred to the motive to steal, which, characteristically, as an idea at least, succumbs to a much slighter mental resistance. When the transference has become firmly fixed, as regards the contents, from then on the impulse to steal remains definitely the 'symbol' for every desire for sexual gratification and absorbs the whole *emotional volume, all the impulsive energy of sexuality—becomes irresistible like sexual instinct.* And this displaced accentuation of passion causes the *pathological irresistible impulse.*"

Thus it appears that Gross's point of view entirely agrees with that of Freud, which is also Dr. Stekel's, who, however, explains the process more simply. We have to deal with a "suppressed and superseded" sexual desire that is carried out through the medium of a symbol or a symbolic action. Every compulsion in psychic life is brought about by suppression. The connection between theft and an abnormal sexual life has already been noticed by earlier observers. It was simply forced upon their perception. Descriptions of theft connected with fetichism are especially frequent.

In his *Psychopathia sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing records a number of suggestive observations. They form a curious collection: a workman who stole shoes from the time he was fourteen; a cobbler who stole night-caps, garters and women's underclothes; an apron-thief whose dreams all centered on aprons; a manufacturer who unlawfully appropriated kid gloves; a day laborer who had stolen about 100 women's handkerchiefs; and a man-servant with a similar record. These thefts betray their sexual ætiology without further explanation. The stolen object has its value as a sexual fetich which is nothing else than a symbol that has become fixed through certain circumstances. Kersten tells the story of a laborer in a quarry who stole a woman's dress and put it on before sexual

intercourse with his wife. He found coition impossible unless he first put on an underskirt.

Women, however, frequently act in another and opposite manner. They hide the stolen articles and do not dare to touch them. This is seen in the case cited by Ladame (*Observations de soi-disant kleptomanie*). A castrated woman who was left a widow in comfortable circumstances was taken ill with an *Angstneurose* (feeling of lassitude, sleeplessness, etc.). Before committing a theft she felt great fear; afterwards always remorse. She did not dare to touch the stolen objects. She behaved as if the matter involved were the touching of genital parts.

Dr. Stekel also reports several of his own observations of real kleptomania. The persons concerned were not fetichists, but neuropaths who out of ungratified sexuality performed symbolic (forbidden) actions. A handsome woman of perhaps forty-five was about to take her four daughters to a ball. Just before leaving the house an incident occurred that excited her very much. Her husband laid his burning cigar on her petticoat. A hole was burnt in it and the thin material began to flame. She was very angry with him. At the ball, about midnight, a lady accused her of having stolen a valuable lace scarf. She declared she had found it, but several witnesses disputed the fact. The matter was finally pleasantly settled. Following this incident she was attacked by serious melancholia, during which one reproach remained obstinately uppermost in her mind. She expressed it by saying, "I reproach myself that I did not give my 'little one' earlier." This referred to four years before, when her youngest daughter might have married a very rich man, but she had refused her consent on the ground that the child was too young.

So far this was all perfectly logical. But underlying this reproach there was an entirely different one which the psycho-analysis brought to light. Daughter, that is, "little one," is a common symbol for vagina. Thus she reproached herself that she had not given her vagina earlier, that she had resisted all temptations. It appeared that her husband was then sexually impotent and had been so for ten years. She was always passionate and very amorous. She had not lacked admirers, but only the courage to sin. She was very pious and regarded marriage as a sacred institution. On the day on which she stole she was sexually much excited, as always during menstruation. The burning cigar that burnt a hole in her skirt reminded her of the time when her husband was still young and fiery (compare Krafft-Ebing's observation of a merchant of twenty-nine who induced orgasm by burning the clothing of women passers-by with his cigar). She set herself firmly against the analysis of her condition. Dr. Stekel resorted to the method that he has

THE SEXUAL ROOT OF KLEPTOMANIA

fully described in his book, *Nervöse Angstzustände und deren Behandlung* (Urban und Schwarzenberg, 1908). He asked her to utter a number of words just as they came into her mind. Among the words that occurred to her were: "cigar, candle, bootjack, electric railway, stein, lamp, flower, box, violin, artist." She was then asked to form a sentence from each of these words. The sentences, the interpretation or significance of which is added to each, were as follows: "The cigar has gone out" (sexual impotence of her husband). "The candle is burnt out" (the same). "A bootjack is a horrid instrument" (her husband used a bootjack). "I like to go on the electric railway; on the electric railway two cars are coupled together." "Criminals are sent to Stein" (Stein is a prison in the vicinity of Vienna). "The lamp is still burning" (lamp: vagina). "I like to pick flowers." "No one looks at an old frump (box)." (The German word *Schachtel* (box) is also used to denote an old, unattractive woman.) "I like to hear the violin." "He must be an artist." Dr. Stekel discovered that her last admirer had been an artist on the violin. A flirtation had gone on between them, but she had not been persuaded to overstep the bounds of propriety. Another symptom that appeared in her melancholy deserves further explanation. She thought that she was impoverished and became very saving. No actual necessity for this existed. She constantly expressed the wish to begin a "new business" and earn money. Also this desire had a sexual significance. She wanted to begin to earn money with her beauty. It was the typical "prostitute's dream," so often found in women neuropaths. Thus all her symptoms were explainable by laying bare the subterranean, suppressed currents of life. The theft was in this case the symbolic representation of a sin in which she could yet retain her sexual purity. The knowledge of sexual symbolism is the key to the comprehension of kleptomania, even perhaps of *all monomanias*. Dr. Stekel analyzes several cases observed by others, as follows:

Didier (*Kleptomanie und Hypnotherapie*, Halle a. S., 1896) tells of a boy who up to the close of his fifteenth year was a good and industrious pupil. Then he suddenly became lazy, apathetic and incapable of study. (This change appears most frequently when sexual instincts become supreme and there is no outlet for them.) The boy committed several thefts. Once before, in his fourth year (period when the first sexual impulse is felt) he had stolen. He broke open his principal's closet. Hypnotherapy effected a complete cure. Didier correctly traces kleptomania back to hysteria as a foundation. We have to thank Freud for our comprehension of these hysterical symptoms. We know now what the connection is between them and unconscious psychic life. We

have to do with hysterical symbolic actions. Breaking open the closet represented symbolically a defloration.

An unmarried woman of twenty-six stole pencils in a shop. She was an incapable sort of person of wandering and inattentive mind. The excuse she gave was that her father kept her too strictly. This girl was also symbolically in search of a phallus (pencil).

In most persons suffering from kleptomania, as in all neuropaths, strong homo-sexual tendencies are found. This is particularly striking in the following case, described by Dr. Chlumsky (*Diebstahl bei erworbenem Schwachsinn*). A servant who suffered from attacks of excitability during menstruation shared a bedroom with her mistress. She asked to be allowed to sleep alone in the hall, saying that the room was much *too hot* for her. During excited dreams she twice fell out of bed in the night. She stole a small music-box out of her mistress's closet and played with it (clearly homo-sexual desire to play with the genital parts of her mistress). Her skirts, jackets and blouses she laid in an unused bed of her mistress's. She was very forgetful, wandering and dreamy. One night she drew the key from under her mistress's pillow and opened a drawer. She broke in a window pane and declared that two men had been there and tried to choke her. Not long ago a case was reported in the Viennese papers of a rich woman who was arrested for stealing several sheets in a public bath. She was caught just as she was trying to hide a sheet in her bloomers. Other stolen sheets were found at her house, all of which had patches where the marking had been cut out. The place and manner of concealment clearly betrayed the sexual ætiology of this monomania. All these cases show us women who are sexually excited and ungratified, who lack either the courage or the opportunity for gratification.

A remarkable explanation is found of the very frequent cases of stealing in childhood. All the cases known to Dr. Stekel were children whose sexual instincts had wakened early and whose desires had been directed toward forbidden things. Unfortunately, the knowledge of the sexual life of children is far from being general. Physicians and pedagogues should be fully instructed in regard to it. In the earliest years of a child's life sexual excitement is expressed by sudden attacks of shame, blushing, stuttering, pavor nocturnus, various feelings of fear, vomiting, diarrhoea, sucking, blinking, making faces, wetting the bed, fits of anger, sleeplessness, irritability and unrest which may easily betray itself by slight twitchings akin to those of St. Vitus dance. Older children, at about the age of puberty, grow noticeably inattentive and incapable of mental concentration; they mope, and their work in school is not up to what it was formerly. They often seek to be alone, grow shy and

THE SEXUAL ROOT OF KLEPTOMANIA

blush easily. At this stage they are often moved to symbolic actions that are interpreted as indicating bad traits of character. Many a boy who has been expelled from school for theft, acted from unconscious, purely sexual motives, and later became an irreproachable character. It is just this harsh treatment that has driven some boys into crime. It is high time that pedagogues and physicians should give greater attention to these expressions of childish sexuality. Dr. Stekel's book, *Nervöse Angstzustände*, contains interesting observations on this subject. Many children in whom the inclination to steal has been observed, grow up to be men and women who are distinguished by a painful sense of honor. Thus some virtues have their origin only in the over-compensation of a suppressed vicious impulse. Most of these cases of thieving in children show unconscious sexual symbolism.

Dr. Stekel describes the case of a painter of high mental and moral caliber who came to him for treatment. Three times in his life he had stolen. The first time, as a boy, he stole a gold watch from a servant in his father's house, sold it and gave away and squandered the money in a day. The psycho-analysis showed that the boy had been foolishly brought up by his parents. For years he had had the opportunity of observing not only normal sexual intercourse between his parents, but also various perverse forms of sexuality, such as cunnilingus. One evening he saw his father kiss the parlor maid. At that time he was exactly twelve years old and already passionately addicted to masturbation. Once having discovered the intimacy, it did not escape him that his father sought every opportunity of being alone with the exceedingly pretty girl. On an evening when the two had locked themselves in, in his father's room, he ransacked the girl's trunk, found the watch and hurried away with it. This action had several motives. He was angry and jealous of the girl, hence he took her watch, which again was only a symbol of her genital parts. (This symbol is found with uncommon frequency in dreams; apparently because of its circular form and because it is put in the pocket.) The girl was in despair when she discovered the theft. At the sight of her grief he felt remorse and at the same time a sort of Sadistic pleasure arising from his ability to make her feel his power and to cause her pain. As a grown man, he visited a married friend whose wife attracted him greatly. When he was leaving, he saw a conch-shell lying in the hall. He snatched it up and hurried off with it. At home he looked at it for hours, examined it all over, and then gave it to a little girl in the street. (The shell had the same symbolic significance as the watch, and the case that he afterward stole.) Under similar circumstances he took a pair of opera glasses, to which he was especially attracted by the case. The woman who owned them, whose husband was

his pupil, had such lovely "peepers." Dr. Stekel intends to give elsewhere a detailed analysis of this highly interesting case, which was completely cured. In his article in the *Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft* he merely mentions the facts and explains their sexual significance.

In another case of kleptomania coming under Dr. Stekel's observation the subject was in every sense of the word a high-minded, philanthropic man. As a child, he repeatedly stole trifles: a piece of soap with the picture of a beautiful woman on the wrapper, a glove from a lady who was visiting his mother, money out of his father's pocket, that he gave to a boy; books from his sister's bookcase, that he sold; a roll from a baker, that he gave to a beggar. These thefts all took place between his sixth and his tenth years. There followed a period of great piety. He repented of his sins and resolved to be a good and noble man, in which he has thoroughly succeeded, with the exception of several erotic missteps. Only once he experienced a serious relapse. At that time he had fallen much in love with a servant. His experiences, however, had made him cautious and he did not dare to follow his instincts. He had also sworn a sacred oath to his wife never to be unfaithful to her again. He arranged to meet the girl one Sunday afternoon and take a short trip with her. He fought with himself a long time and finally decided to flee and to go out to his wife in the country. He immediately went to the railway station. There happened to be no one at the ticket office window, but a cheap little bag was lying on the shelf in front of it. He was seized with an irresistible impulse, took the bag and stuffed it quickly into his pocket. Then he hurried into the lavatory, where he emptied the contents of the bag into his purse. From a scrap of paper in it he concluded that the owner was a servant. The bag itself he threw into the water-closet. Then he went back into the waiting-room as if in a dazed condition. There he saw a servant hunting everywhere and talking to a policeman. It left him entirely unaffected. The next day he regretted his action, felt that he had sunk very low and wanted to repair the damage. He read all the papers, and advertised in several, but in vain; he was not able to find the girl. This experience was succeeded by a period of deep psychic depression.

It is surely not necessary to add the analysis of this case here. Even to those readers who are unfamiliar with Freud's enlightening explanations of the activity of the subconscious mind the symbolic significance of the actions will appear.

These examples show us the tremendous importance of sexual instinct in the origin of kleptomania. Similar examples might be given relating to pyromania, the impulse to set fire to something; and hydromania, the pleasure of playing with water.