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JOHN ADDIGTON SYMONDS
HOMOSEXUAL

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Chapter 1

Biography of John Addington Symonds

1.1 John Addington Symonds and Rome

When in 1985 Frassinelli, an Italian publisher, made John Addington Symonds' autobiography (*Memories*) appear in bookshops, I lived in Lombardy for work. Well, I read the book in just two days. I perfectly remember the deep impression I brought back from that reading.

It is not only the story of a homosexual, but it is a document of radical sincerity and of the highest human depth, a document of extraordinary modernity even if it concerns a man born in 1840. The homosexual reader today can find a large part of his own world in Symonds' memories.

Virtually all the book is focused on homosexuality, and the cultural aspects related to the author's critical and literary work are relegated to a marginal dimension. Symonds left disposition that the *Memoirs* could be published only 50 years after his death, he certainly did not expect celebrity from this work.

The autobiography, despite being prior to Wilde's conviction and to the birth of psychoanalysis, represents a honest and transparent research aimed at documenting the single steps of the development of the author's homosexuality. This is not the story of a homosexual closed on himself but of a man of profound culture, married and with four daughters, very close to Italian history and culture, and excellent connoisseur of Italian language. This is also why Symonds' memoirs constitute a unique document because this book is a portrait without reticence of a homosexual man of the second half of the nineteenth century seen from the inside, as he saw himself.

But the real charm of this reading, which makes it unique, derives from the

fact that, proceeding page after page, one gets the impression of getting to know the author better and better, to understand his deep torments, his disturbances, his inconsistencies, and somehow the reader feels him nearby, as if John were talking about himself in a very simple and direct way and he gets used to that presence as if he were in the presence of a friend.

In the last few days I have taken up Symonds' Memoirs and reread them. Even though I am now old, I am still fascinated by this reading. It is known that Symonds died in Rome and was buried in Rome, at the English cemetery (non-Catholic cemetery) near the Pyramid of Caius Cestius. This morning I took the tram and went to Porta San Paolo and then to the English cemetery, everyone knows that John Keats and Percy Shelley are buried there and the ashes of Gramsci of Pasolinian memory are preserved there but, to limit ourselves to the most famous homosexual characters, there Carlo Emilio Gadda and Dario Bellezza also rest. I easily found the tomb of Addington Symonds, a minimal burial, on the ground, with a headstone, unfortunately one of the many abandoned tombs.

Stopping nearby I had the impression of knowing the life of the man who was buried there, far beyond what the tombstone said, and it was he himself who had told me about himself. His main concern, in the autobiography, was to tell the truth and to make people understand what homosexuality really is, he was certain that "a fellow man" could have thoroughly understood the travail of his soul and would have considered him a honest man. If John could have imagined that, more than 120 years after his death, his work would still have been a reason for reflection for many "his fellow men", I think he would have been happy.

1.2 Risks associated with publication

At least a mention should be made of the risks that a possible publication of the Memoirs could entail. The *Criminal Law Amendment Act* of 1885 had criminalized sexual acts between men and, using too much general terms, had declared the so-called 'gross indecency' criminally punishable, allowing the individual courts an unlimited discretion in pursuing sexual inappropriate behaviours that constituted serious crimes but also conducts of every kind even if only vaguely or hypothetically related to sexuality. If it is true that since 1877 Symonds lived between Switzerland, a country where the influence of the *Code Napoleon* had favoured a notable tolerance about sexual acts between consenting adults, and Italy, where Zanardelli Code had even decriminalized homosexuality, however, we must not forget that most of the people explicitly mentioned by Symonds, who somehow would have

accepted being considered homosexual, were still British subjects and therefore subjected to the criminalization of homosexuality. Certainly Symonds is not thinking of an immediate publication of his Memoirs but of a *future* and limited edition intended above all for specialists in sexual and ethical issues.

1.3 Biography written by Horatio Brown

As is well known, in 1895 was published the Biography of John Addington Symonds written by Oratio Brown, a friend of Symonds, particularly attached to Venice and the Italian world, which would deserve a specific biography. If you compare the Biography published by Brown in '95 with these Memoirs, you can realize the enormous difference between the two works, the first destined for publication and absolutely reticent with respect to John's private life and the second, almost completely disconnected from the academic and literary career of John, and totally focused on the development of his sexuality. The question of the competences regarding the publication of the Memoirs entrusted by Symonds himself to Oratio Brown, and of the interventions of the Symonds family on the same issue is dealt in detail in the introduction to the volume *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*, in the critical edition edited by Amber K. Regis for Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, in the *Genders and Sexualities in History* series. From this fundamental work of great scientific value, which I recommend to anyone wishing to study the question more in depth, all the quotations from the Memoirs contained in my essay are taken.

But let's get to the Symonds biography.

Chapter 2

A SEXUAL BIOGRAPHY

2.1 Family education

Born October 5, 1840 in Bristol, Berkeley Square 7, John lives in that house until June '51, when he moves to Clifton Hill House.

Of his mother, who had died of scarlet fever when John was 4, only fragments of memories remain in John's mind until adulthood.

John lives with his three sisters, his father and a maternal aunt. He receives a religious education indirectly. He himself tells us:

"In some way or another – perhaps listening to the dismal sermons of the Blind Asylum - I developed a morbid sense of sin, and screamed at night about imaginary acts of disobedience. My aunt or my father, hearing me sob and cry, left their chairs in the drawing-room and tried to reassure me. [...]

I was persuaded that the devil lived bear the door-mat in a dark corner of the passage by my father's bedroom. I thought that he appeared to me there under the shape of a black shadow, skurrying about upon the ground, with the faintest indication of a slightly whirling tail.

When the cholera was raging in the year 1848, I heard so much about it that I fell into a chronic state of hysterical fear. Someone had told me of the blessing which attend ejaculatory prayers. So I kept perpetually mumbling 'Oh, God, save me from the cholera!' This superstitious habit clung to me for years. I believe that it obstructed the growth of sound ideas upon religion; but I cannot say that I ever was sincerely pious I ever realized the language about God I heard and parroted."¹

¹p. 69.

John remembers with respect but with detachment his maternal grandmother, an austere aristocratic lady, for whom religion was a fundamental value, used to promoting the faith in her own way by inviting different people to afternoon refreshments that became occasions for preaching and proselytizing:

"Heavy teas like those described by Dickens were a frequent occurrence, after which the Chadband² of the evening discoursed at a considerable length. Then followed prayers, in the course of which a particularly repulsing pharmaceutical chemist from Board Mead uplifted his nasal voice in petitions to the Almighty which too often alas! degenerated into glorifications of the Plymouth sect at Bristol and objurgations against the perverse members of other religious bodies. [...]

My father was compared to Naaman,³ who refused to bathe in Jordan – Jordan being Bethesda, or the meeting house of the Plymouth Brethen.

Sometimes I was taken to Bethesda, a doleful place, which brought no healing to my soul, but seemed to me a pool of stagnant pietism and turbid middle-class Philistinism. [...]

My grandmother naturally made a strong point of family prayers. She delighted in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, the minatory chapters of the Prophets, and the Apocalypse. In a deep sonorous voice, starting with a groan and rising to a quaver, she used to chant forth those lugubrious verse which began and ended with *Thus saith the Lord!* I remember hearing nothing of the Gospel or the love of Christ for the whole human race either in the readings from scripture or in the extempore prayers which followed. She concentrated her attention on the message to the chosen people, with a tacit assumption that all who lived outside the Plymouth fold were children of wrath."⁴

After describing his more distant paternal ancestors, Symonds talks about his grandfather:

"This brings me to speak of my grandfather John Symonds of Oxford, who was the first to react against the hereditary nar-

²Mr. Chadband, a hypocritical and gluttonous minister. Appears in Charles Dickens's *Bleack House* (1852-53). In Chapter 19 this 'gorging vessel' eats a very large dinner before preaching at Jo the crossing-sweeper.

³Naaman is cured of leprosy by Elisha, the prophet, who commands him to wash in the River Jordan seven times (2 Kings 5)

⁴p. 73.

rowness of the family creed. Remaining a Dissenter, he became in mature life what may best be described as a Christian Stoic. He was a good Latin scholar and wrote voluminous diaries and meditations in the style of Seneca. Not an elastic or optimistic nature – on the contrary rigid and circumscribed, depressed by a melancholy temperament and by the groom of Calvinism, which assumed in him the form of philosophical fatalism.

This comparative disengagement from sectarian doctrine, combined with the study of the classics and of English thought from Bacon through Locke to Hume and Adam Smith, formed a type of character well calculated to start my father upon his own path of emancipation. A severe uncompromising sense of duty, a grim incapability of any transactions with the world, marked my grandfather out as the lineal and loyal descendant of his Puritan ancestors.

These moral qualities were transmitted to my father. In my father they became transfigured and spiritualized. The advanced ground reached by my father, was the soil in which I grew up."⁵

It is his grandfather who teaches John the first rudiments of Latin, starting before the age of five.

The second chapter of the autobiography carries the specification:

"Containing material which none but students of Psychology and Ethics need peruse"⁶

and is dedicated to the reconstruction of the first sexual disturbances (before the age of ten) of the very young John, today we would say of his sexual imprinting.

In introducing the chapter Symonds puts it this way:

"The plan of these Memoirs, which are intended to describe the evolution of a somewhat abnormally constituted individual, obliges me to interpolate a section here, which might otherwise have been omitted with satisfaction to myself. When the whole interest of a life centres, not in action, but in mental development and moral experience, truth becomes imperatively necessary with regard to points of apparent insignificance.

No one, however, can regard the first stirrings of the sexual instinct as a trifling phenomenon in any life. It is only prejudice

⁵p. 86.

⁶p. 99.

and false shame which lead people to conceal the facts and phases of the *vita sexualis*, so essentially important in the formation of character and the determination of mental qualities "7

It should be emphasized that Symonds wrote before Freud and that his claims are by no means taken for granted in Victorian England.

Symonds identifies an already definitively erotic character in some memories of early childhood and expresses himself as follows:

"Among my earliest recollections, I must record certain visions, half-dream, half-reverie, which were certainly erotic in their nature, and which recurred frequently just before sleeping. I used to fancy myself crouched upon the floor amid a company of naked adult men: sailors, such I had seen about the streets of Bristol. The contact of their bodies afforded me a vivid mysterious pleasure. Singular as it may appear that a mere child should have formed such fancies, and unable as I am to account for their origin. I am positive regarding the truth of this fact. The reverie was so often repeated, so habitual, that there is no doubt about its psychological importance."<8

Symonds goes on and describes what can be called his sexual imprinting:

"A handsome lad of a full-blown healthy type once masturbated in my presence during this period of childhood. He wanted me to try the game. But though the sight disturbed me not uncomfortably, I shrank with horror from his touch, and managed to escape from the room. The attractions of a dimly divine almost mystic sensuality persisted in my nature, side by side with a marked repugnance to lust in action, throughout my childhood and boyhood down to an advanced stage of manhood."<9

John describes his first contacts with straight sexuality like this:

"At the same time, I was unfortunate enough to be thrown into the society of a coarse girl, who liked to expose herself and make me touch her sexual organs. They neither attracted nor repelled me, nor did they rouse my curiosity. Only they displeased my sense of smell. Once when I found a male cousin of mine preparing to copulate with her, I felt a strange and powerful disgust."<10

⁷p. 99.

⁸p. 100

⁹p. 100.

¹⁰p. 100.

About nine years old he was initiated by a dirty-minded schoolfellow into the mysteries of sexual duality, coition, impregnation and childbirth.

These things interest him as a kind of natural science lesson, but they do not produce any heterosexual erotic fantasies. John continues to dream of physical contact with naked sailors and is only attracted to the male sex.

After reading Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, he is fascinated by the figure of the adolescent Adonis, who at the same time is for him an object of emulation-identification and also an object of passionate love. Venus is not for him the object of sexual fantasies but rather the sign of the attractive power of Adonis and a kind of teacher in love for a young man.

As Symonds very keenly observes, Shakespeare has insisted much more on the beauty of Adonis than on that of Venus and for this reason too John is particularly disturbed by that reading. John is convinced that his reading of Shakespeare is exactly in line with what Shakespeare himself had meant.

In discussing Ulrichs' theories about homosexuality, John describes himself as follows:

"I should certainly be tabulated as a *Mittel Urning*, holding a mean between the *Mannling* and the *Weibling*, that is to say, one whose emotions are directed to the male sex during the period of adolescence and early manhood; who is not marked either by an effeminate passion for robust adults or by the predilection for young boys; in other words, one whose comradely instincts are tinged with a distinct sexual partiality. But in this sufficiently accurate description of my attitude, I do not recognize anything which justifies the theory of a female soul. Morally and intellectually, in character and taste and habits, I am more masculine than many men I know who adore women. I have no feminine feelings for the males who rouse my desires. The anomaly of my position is that I admire the physical beauty of men more than women, derive more pleasure from their contact and society, and am stirred to sexual sensations exclusively by persons of the male sex"¹¹

John spends the first period of his adolescence (1851-1854) in Clifton Hill House, his new house in the hills, from which one can look out over the entire city of Bristol. The garden around the house, with its colors and smells, will become almost a magical place in the memory.

¹¹p. 103.

2.2 Harrow

In the spring of 1854, John had to leave Clifton Hill House to study at Harrow on the Hill. He enters Harrow with the idea that no one could change him *inside* and that he was facing something inevitable but at the same time external. Health does not assist him and none of his valid teachers can shake him. John does not participate in most sports activities. Harrow's business is hierarchically organized through class leaders, the student body representative, and faculty teachers. At the top of the organization there is rector Vaughan. When John, who is a class leader, is humiliated by the representative of the student body, he does not hesitate to go directly to the rector to assert his reasons and he gets satisfaction from him.

Symonds gratefully remembers one of his Harrow teachers, the Reverend John Smith, and lists some boys he was friends with and with whom he lived carefree and substantially happy moments. There is no doubt that this positive dimension of Harrow's memories was influenced by the presence of so many handsome boys in the happiest moments of their youth "superb athletic beings round me, whose lives were completely joyous to themselves and satisfying to aesthetic contemplation"¹²

The school, then as now, is not only made up of relationships between teachers and students, but also, if not above all, of personal relationships between students. If this is still true today, it must have been much more so when the boys were forced to go to boarding schools, away from their families.

Thus Symonds opens the fifth chapter of his autobiography:

"One thing at Harrow very soon arrested my attention. It was the moral state of the school. Every boy of good looks had a female name, and was recognized either as a public prostitute or as some bigger fellow's 'bitch'.

Bitch was the word in common usage to indicate a boy who yielded his person to a lover. The talk in the dormitories and the studies was incredibly obscene. Here and there one could not avoid seeing acts of onanism, mutual masturbation, the sports of naked boys in bed together. There was no refinement, no sentiment, no passion; nothing but animal lust in these occurrences. They filled me with disgust and loathing."¹³

But sex is perhaps not the worst aspect of Harrow's indiscipline. Some boys, after abusing one of their mates, humiliate him in front of others, punch, kick

¹²p. 141-142.

¹³p. 147.

and spit him and address him with obscene insults. Those "beasts", as John calls them, try to seduce him too in the first semester of his stay in Harrow, but John immediately decides not to be "available" and continues on the one hand to sublimate and idealize male eros and for the other to condemn unreservedly what he is forced to see every day, but certainly those shows are not indifferent to him. John believes that his classmates would overcome with the passing of age what appears to him as a decidedly immature sexuality, if anything, he is amazed that the professors and the rector do not have knowledge of what really happens in the college.

During a lesson, a certain Dering sends a certain O'Brien, called Leila, a note to inform him that he has a bed available and to invite him to join him in the interval between the third and fourth hour, that is, between four and five in the afternoon. The note is intercepted by the professor and the rector Vaughan is invested with the thing. Daring is punished with flogging and O'Brien is forced to copy many lines. John at the time, at least on a rational level, was convinced that the behaviours of those boys were socially harmful as well as sinful and must be decisively repressed.

So far the picture would be that typical of a school in which the students, who are followed from the point of view of their studies, are abandoned, as for the rest, totally to themselves, but in reality things are much more complex. In January 1858 John is literally shocked by the confidence of his companion, Alfred Pretor, who confesses that the rector Vaughan, a man of the Church, has started a love affair with him. Pretor shows John a series of passionate letters written by Vaughan that remove any doubt from John as to the veracity of that confession. John describes his reactions as follows:

"When I recovered from the first astonishment into which Pretor's extraordinary revelation plunged me, I submitted the fact to casuistical analysis. It proved convincingly that I was wrong in imagining that this species of vice formed only a phase of boyish immaturity. I was disgusted to find it in a man holding the highest position of responsibility, consecrated by the church, entrusted with the welfare of six hundred youths – a man who had recently prepared me for confirmation, from whose hands kneeling by the side of Alfred Pretor, I received the sacrament, and whom I had been accustomed to regard as the pattern of my conduct."¹⁴

John, however, rather than feel real indignation against Vaughan, is perplexed because the rector could have found boys much less crude than Pretor. John's reaction, however, ends up bending towards moralism: he tries first of

¹⁴p. 150.

all to convince Pretor to break that bond but Pretor doesn't want to know, so he thinks of facing Vaughan directly. Once John is in the rector's office reading Greek verses and Vaughan puts a hand on his leg, a gesture that John considers insinuating and reckless. We would have expected a reaction from John but nothing happens.

At that time, other facts intervened to cool John's moralistic instincts:

"I fell in love with a handsome powerful boy called Huyshe;¹⁵ and I remember stealing his hymn-book from his seat in chapel; but I never spoke to him. I also fell in love with Eliot Yorke,¹⁶ who used to come to my room; but I kept a respectful distance from him. There must have happened some change in my manner or appearance; for a depraved lad, whom I had known for three years, on one occasion finding me alone in my room, suddenly dared to throw his arms round me, kissed me and thrust his hand into my trousers. At that moment I nearly gave way to sensuality. I was narcotized by the fellow's contact and the forecast of coming pleasure. But in this as in all other cases, the inclination for vulgar lust was wanting. That saved me from self-abasement and traffic with the unclean thing."¹⁷

2.3 Plato

In the sixth course of the school, Plato was read. John reads the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus* in one night and tells us:

"that night was one of the most important nights of my life"¹⁸

The identification with Plato's thought is profound. In practice, Plato provides him with a model of sublimated male eros with a high moral tone and therefore fully legitimizes in John's eyes that type of eros by detaching him from the foul-mouthed and low-profile sexual activities that he could observe at Harrow.

The echo of those readings of Plato's texts can also be found, many years later, in the correspondence exchanged by the 47-year-old Symonds with prof. Jowett, for which he had revised a translation of the *Symposium*.

¹⁵Francis John Huyshe (1840-1905) would become Vicar of Wimborne and Hon. Canon Salisbury.

¹⁶Eliot Constantine Yorke (1843-1878), son of Charles Philip Yorke, 4th Earl of Hardwicke. He would become a politician and equerry to the Duke of Edinburgh

¹⁷p.151.

¹⁸p. 152.

It should be emphasized that Symonds maintains a very ambiguous attitude, one would expect him to support the reading of Plato in schools and universities because that reading could help many young homosexuals to find themselves and see the noble face of homosexuality, but this is not the attitude of Symonds, who defines Plato's reading for young homosexuals as a "sweet poison". So he therefore writes in a letter to prof. Jowett on February 1, 1889:

"Many forms of passion between males are matters of fact in English schools, colleges, cities, rural districts. Such passion is innate in some persons non less than the ordinary sexual appetite is innate in the majority. With the nobler of such predetermined temperaments the passion seeks a spiritual or ideal transfiguration. When, therefore, individuals of the indicated species come into contact with the reveries of Plato, (clothed in graceful diction, immersed in the peculiar emotion, presented with the considerable dramatic force, gilt with a mystical philosophy, throbbing with the realism of actual Greek life), the effect upon them has the force of a revelation. They discover that what they had been blindly groping after was once an admitted possibility – non in a mean hole or corner – but that the race whose literature forms the basis of their higher culture, lived in that way, aspired in that way. For such students of Plato there is no question of 'figures of speech', but of concrete facts, facts in the social experience of Athens, from which men derived courage, drew intellectual illumination, took their first step in the path which led to great achievements and the arduous pursuit of truth. [...]

It is futile by any evasion of central difficulty, by any dexterity in the use of words, to escape from the stubborn fact that natures so exceptionally predisposed find in Plato the encouragement of their furtively cherished dreams. The *Lysis*, the *Charmides*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Symposium* – how many varied and imaginative pictures these dialogues contain of what is only a sweet poison to such minds!

Meanwhile the temptations of the actual world surrounded them: friends of like temper, boys who respond to kindness, reckless creature abroad upon the common ways of life. *Erôs Pandemos* is everywhere. Plato lends the light, the gleam, that never was on sea or shore.

Thus Plato delays the damnation of these souls by ensnaring the noblest part of them – their intellectual imagination. And strong

as custom may be, strong as piety, strong as the sense of duty, these restraints have always been found frail against the impulse of powerful inborn natural passion and the allurements of inspired art.

The contest in the soul is terrible, and victory, if gained, is only won at the cost of a struggle which thwarts and embitters.

We do not know how many English youths have been injured in this way. More, I firmly believe, than is suspected"¹⁹

Symonds adds that when homosexual boys are condemned by educators, they cannot bring to their defense other than the fact that their instincts are innate and the fact that the same men who condemn them have put in their hands the literature that most inflames those instincts. Symonds admits that he may have given too much weight to the risk associated with reading Plato but concludes:

"It is indeed impossible to exaggerate the anomaly of making Plato a text-book for students, and a household-book for readers, in a nation which repudiates Greek love, while the baser forms of Greek love have grown to serious proportions in the seminar-ies of youth and in gret centres of social life belonging to that nation."²⁰

2.4 Willie

But let's go back to the events following a chronological line. When March 1858 is over, and the term is over, John returns to Clifton for Easter. One Sunday morning, the morning that he will consider fundamental in his whole life, John sets his gaze on a chorister who sits almost in front of him in the church, it is Willie Dyer, the first boy John falls deeply in love with. John is then 17 and Willie is 14. John writes to Willie and asks for a portrait and Willie sends him a photograph of him, then they arrange to meet at 10am on April 10 in the cathedral cloister. Symonds says:

"From that morning I date the birth of my real self. Thirty-two years have elapsed since then; and still I can hardly hold the pen when I attempt to write about it. Much sentimental nonsense has been talked about first love. Yet I am speaking the bare truth when I say that my affection for this boy exhausted my

¹⁹p. 153-154.

²⁰p.155.

instinctive faculty of loving. I have never felt the same unreason and unreasoning emotion for any other human being. I could not marry him; the modern society provided no bond of comradeship whereby we might have been united. So my first love flowed to waste. I was unable to deal justly with him; the mortification of the anomalous position he and I were placed in, did much to degrade my character."²¹

However, at first John does not realize the difficulty of managing a situation like that and the love affair with Willie goes on: they see each other or write each other every day.

"He returned my affection with a simple loyal love. Our intimacy, though clandestine – though we two boys, the elder by three years and the younger, met together and exchanged our hearts without the sanction of family or friends – was wholly respectful and absolutely free from evil. More than a year elapsed before I dared to do more than touch his hand. Twice only in my life did I kiss him on the lips"²²

Symonds talks about his love for Willie in lyrical tones, but his relationship with Willie also had a problematic aspect, because it was lived in secret:

"Only too well enough I knew, alas! That if I avowed my emotion to my father or his friends, I should meet – non merely with no sympathy or understanding or credence – but that I should arouse horror, pain, aversion."²³

2.5 Balliol

When Symonds enters Balliol (Oxford), in the fall of 1858, he must make new friends because almost all of the Harrow students who went to the university headed to Cambridge. In the *Memoirs*, John cites many fellow students of Balliol who then made brilliant careers and also reports significant episodes to clarify what air was blowing inside the university with regard to homosexuality.

A certain Urquhart, who ran after the church choristers, tries to seduce John, but a certain Munro, a handsome cricketer, makes him realize how

²¹p. 157.

²²p. 157.

²³p. 159.

much Urquhart's attentions can compromise him. Instead the relationship with prof. John Conington appears, at least initially, completely positive; Symonds stays with him every night in his private quarters until midnight. Conington had sympathy for the Romanesque affections towards lads and in the winter of 58-59 he made John read "Jonica", a collection of poems by William Johnson, professor at Eaton. That reading is certainly neither neutral nor casual. William Johnson will be forced to resign from Eaton at Easter 1872 due to a compromising letter he had written to one of his students, intercepted by his parents.

It should be emphasized that when prof. Conington makes Symonds read "Jonica" the scandal on Johnson's name is still to come, Conington is therefore privately aware of Johnson's tendencies and explains to Symonds the exact meaning of some poetic compositions of "Jonica" in relation to a specific person and that is to Charlie Wood (Symonds' same age), favorite pupil of prof. Johnson, who later became Lord Halifax, a very prominent clergyman.

Symonds realizes that his experiences in Harrow are not all that strange and exceptional, so he thinks about writing a letter to Johnson explaining his feelings and asking him for advice. Johnson replies with a long letter claiming that

"Affection between persons of the same sex is no less natural and rational than the ordinary passionate relations"²⁴

About Johnson's letter, who was 17 years his senior, Symonds notes that:

"Underneath Jonson's frank exposition of this unconventional morality there lay a wistful yearning sadness – the note of disappointment and forced abstention. I have never found this note absent in lovers of my sort and Jonson's, unless the men have cast prudence to the winds and staked their all on cynicism."²⁵

2.6 Vaugan

Symonds is so distracted by the reading and the new environment that in the spring of 1859 he fails his Greek grammar exams but does not make a tragedy of it, he is obviously forced to tell his father that he has been rejected, but the fact that he has won a competition of English poetry at Balliol dilutes the unpleasantness of the admission of failure.

²⁴p. 170.

²⁵p. 171.

In the frequent talks between Symonds and prof. Conington, when the speech falls again on the unrecognized passion between males, Conington corners Symonds on Harrow's secret life and in particular on the behaviour of the rector Vaughan and Symonds tells him the story of the relationship between Vaughan and the student Pretor, Conington is deeply upset and a little skeptical, but Symonds clearly says he has irrefutable evidence.

Conington is likely afraid of being involved in dangerous gossip like Vaughan, some time later convinces John to go to Clifton to his father with Pretor's letters and diaries to inform him of the incident. John, then 18, finds himself in the awkward situation of accusing the dean of his old school. John also realizes that he has violated Pretor's trust by showing others a very private letter from him. As Symonds himself admits, it is particularly embarrassing for a homosexual boy to accuse a man much older than him of homosexuality, but moral indignation ends up prevailing:

"My blood boiled and my nerves stiffened when I thought what mischief life at Harrow was doing daily to young lads under the autocracy of a hypocrite."²⁶

John's father, having examined the evidence, has no doubts, he writes to Vaughan, orders him to resign immediately and to renounce other ecclesiastical offices for the future. Vaughan comes to Clifton and accepts the conditions imposed on him.

A few days later Vaughan's wife, a Stanley, also comes to Clifton and she falls to her knees at the feet of John's father, who, though troubled by the woman's pleas, is adamant. Vaughan resigns and no one knows why, except John, his father, Conington and some students from Cambridge and Oxford. A banquet is organized in honour of Vaughan who gives a short speech to greet the faculty and is applauded.

The government offers Vaughan a bishopric, which Vaughan refuses, then offers him another which Vaughan accepts because as bishop he would enter the House of Lords. As soon as John's father finds out, he immediately telegraphs Vaughan to cancel the acceptance and Vaughan ends up refusing the second bishopric as well. Pretor and his friends strongly condemn the fact that John told others the confidences he received and thus betrayed the trust of a friend. However, John believes he has done his duty and is apologized by the fact that Vaughan's story was known to several people even before he gave up. Hugh Pearson, a friend of John, reveals that the Bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce²⁷, had given him this speech:

²⁶p. 173.

²⁷Samuel Wilberforce (1805-1873) was appointed Bishop of Oxford in 1845 and Bishop of Winchester in 1869. Wilberforce's outspokenness in national and political debates earned

"I am certain that Vaughan had some grave reason for leaving Harrow and refusing two mitres. An ugly story must lie behind. You had better make a friend of me. If I discover the truth, I shall be an enemy."²⁸

Pearson replied to the Bishop of Oxford:

"Even if I knew something, it would be my duty to withhold it. But you have no right to suppose that I do."
'Very well', said the bishop: 'I shall find out. And I have warned you'²⁹

Time later the bishop came back to Pearson and told him that he had learned everything at a dinner, from a lady who sat next to him and that he had also communicated the facts to the Archbishop of Canterbury and the prime minister. In practice, many people knew before the public scandal but the thing was kept warm to be used, if necessary, as a means of blackmail, at the appropriate time.

The story of Vaughan's resignation has a result, however, as John expresses himself about it:

"The chief good which emerged from so much evil for me, was that I grew to be an intimate friend of my father. No veil remained between us. He understood my character; I felt his sympathy and relied upon his wisdom. We joined hearts, not only as son and parent, but also as men of diverse temperament and ages aspiring to the higher life in common."³⁰

2.7 End of Willie's story

As for the story with Willie Dyer, John's father advises him to give up intimacy to avoid getting compromised, also given his delicate position in the Vaughan affair but, hidden behind the advice to use prudence, there is also a social prejudice against Dyer, the son of a tailor, who certainly does not belong to the same social level as John.

John, in the end, under the pressure of his father and fearing to strongly discredit the boy he loved, if their relationship had become public, renounces

him the nickname 'Soapy Sam' (according to popular accounts, Disraeli described him as 'saponaceous')

²⁸p. 175.

²⁹p. 175.

³⁰p. 177.

Willie, or rather renounces talking to him in public, but continues to see him secretly:

"At that important moment of my life, I could not understand, and I've never been able to understand, why people belonging to a different strata of society – if they love each other – should not enter into comradeship. But my father made me see that, under the existing conditions of English manners, an ardent friendship between me (a young man gently born, bred at Harrow, advancing to the highest academical honours at Balliol) and Willie (a Bristol chorister, the son of a Dissenting tailor), would injure not my prospects only but his reputation.

The instinct of my blood, the conventionalities under which I had been trained, the sympathy I felt for sisters and for brothers-in-law, the ties which bound me to the class of gentlefolk, brought me to look upon myself, as an aberrant being who was being tutored by my father's higher sense of what is right in conduct.

Furthermore I recognized that in my own affection for Willie there was something similar to the passion which had ruined Vaughan. I foresaw the possibility, if I persisted in my love for him, of being brought into the open rupture with my family, and would involve my friend thereby in what would hamper his career by casting the stigma of illicit passion on our intercourse.

Under this pressure of arguments from without, of sense of weakness within, and of conventional traditions which had made me what I was, I yielded. I gave up Willie Dyer as my avowed heart's friend and comrade. I submitted to the desirability of not acknowledging the boy I loved in public.

But I was not strong enough to break the bonds which linked us, or to extirpate the living love I felt for him. I carried on our intimacy in clandestine ways, and fed my temperament on sweet emotions in secret. This deceit and the encouragement of what I then recognized as an immoral impulse, brought me cruel wrong."³¹

John actually feels dishonest towards Willie, their meetings are stealthy and embarrassed, and John ends up paying 50 guineas to the Bristol Cathedral organist to ensure Willie a musical education, as the boy wishes. After all, a very miserable end to what seemed like a love story able to withstand any storm.

³¹p. 177-178.

2.8 Alfred Brooke

In the autumn of '59 a certain Shorting arrived in Oxford, quite handsome and with shiny blond hair. He is taken in sympathy by John and his friends, but his behaviour too open towards the choristers of Magdalen puts him in trouble.

Between '60 and '61 John engages in his studies and travels a lot, he devotes six hours a day to reading but spends many more in an attempt to free himself from amorous passion. In the summer of '62 he obtains full marks in the *Litterae Humaniores* and is the best of his year. So John describes his "inner life" at that time:

"The quest of ideal beauty, incarnating in breathing male beings, or eternalized in everduring works of art, was leading me to a precipice, from which no exit seemed possible except in suicide or what I then considered sin."³²

In the midst of the most intense period of his studies, when in Clifton he stayed up late into the night to read, a new fact shakes John's soul:

"I fell violently in love with a cathedral chorister called Alfred Brooke.³³ The passion I conceived for him differed considerably from my affection for Willie Dyer. It was more intense, unreasonable, poignant – at one and the same time more sensual and more ideal. I still think that this boy had the most beautiful face I ever saw and the most fascinating voice I ever heard."³⁴

"The state of my mind during this preponderance of an ever-recurrent ever-repressed longing for Alfred Brooke will be shown by the following prose dithyramb I find among my papers. It was written down, I think, in the year 1865 when the tyranny had been overlived but still vibrated in memory.

"*Quemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum*"³⁵

³²p. 182.

³³Henry Alfred Brooke (b. 1846) is recorded in 1861 census as a visitor to John C. Rose at Bishop Street, Bristol; his occupation is listed as 'Pupil (Musician)'. Brooke did not, however, pursue a career in music. He is listed in 1871 census as a bank clerk, but his family at Gloucester Terrace, Bristol, remained musical: his father John, is a 'Professor of Music', his sister a 'Teacher of Music' and his brother a 'Musician'.

³⁴p. 193.

³⁵'As the hart panteth after water brooks' The first line of Psalm 42.

1

Of Alfred Brooke: of the face that ceases not to haunt me – the body, voluptuous and stalwart, that deprives me of my natural rest.

Light hair; bright purple-blue eyes; pale delicately flushed complexion; firm bold level gaze; square white forehead; large humid mouth; vibrating voice; athletic throat and well-formed breast; broad hard hands; poise of trunk upon massive hips; thick and sinewy thighs; prominent and lusty testicles; brawny calves; strong well-planted feet.

Womanly whiteness and fullness in spite of all this; softness mingled with audacity; lasciviousness beneath the virile bosom; love-languor in the large bold steady eyes; invitation in the ringing voice; readiness to grant favours; knowledge and appreciation of sensual delight. I roll on my bed in the night-watches; I clench my fists and beat my brow. The flesh rises with me, and the soul is faint through longing. I thirst for him as the hart panteth after waterbrooks. I cry after him for whom I turn aside. I scorn myself when I remember what he offered an I refused.

2

Before my study-window he passed one morning.³⁶ I raised my head from the desk where Plato lay. He looked from the pavement, nodded and smiled. Even now I can see him with the frank and open face, the face of invitation, the body that exhaled delight, the glance that said 'I wait for you'. I let the lad pass, held my breath tight and caught at the window-curtain. He was gone. Down into the street I rushed, dared not cry out nor follow; flung myself upon the grass and dead leaves of the garden; groaned aloud for him, and wrestled. I knew that he was waiting to assuage my soul's thirst". Yet I refrained.

3

To my bedroom at another time he came. His voice was husky, and his lips seemed drowthy for kisses.

I was in my dressing-gown. My bed stood in a corner of the room.

³⁶This incident happened on Monday Oct 7 1861.

I spoke to him reservedly - sent him away without one kiss. He met my father on the staircase.

I lay awake all the night, kissing the bed in which he sat, watering the coverlid with tears, praying and cursing in one breath.

In the morning my father said: 'Son, you have a fever.' That day I left home, and returned not for many weeks.

4

Shall I speak of a third time? - Late in the evening of a dull October day the hunger to see Alfred came upon me. I walked to his house, three miles away. I found him with his father and his brothers; he was in his shirt-sleeves, copying attorney's parchments. Down to the hall-door he came, athletic, radiant, the sweetest and the strangest sight to see.

I took him with me. Out into the night we went, the Clifton Night, the night of moist west wind and flaring gas-lamps. We stood at gusty corners, looked at each other's faces by the quivering light. The magnetism of his hand was on my arm; the fascination of his voice and breathing drowsed me.

We drove together; up and down in the dark night we drove. I knew what I desired: I felt what he was willing to grant. Yet the shyness of my heart raised a barrier between us. Our words fell like straw-flakes down a deep well.

At midnight I released him. Of my money he took a good store. He walked away, careless, scornful, disappointed. There was that he loved better than gold, and I had not offered that. Yet he liked gold too, and what gold bought, wine, good cheer, pleasure.

He called me a simpleton no doubt. Yet he feared and respected me. Verily I think he loved me.

But I, when I was left without him, balked, ashamed, regretful, thrilling - and how shall I describe the tension of the aching brain and over-wrought nerves, the blushing cheek and burning head, the parched throat, the self-scorning and deeply-degraded soul, the thirst and stretching out of wistful arms, empty, never to be filled, the desire, despair, prostration, godlessness, the tyranny of the flesh, the aspiration of the spirit?

They called my ensuing illness the result of over-work and religious perplexity.

5

Shall I speak of a fourth time?- George Riseley³⁷ and Alfred Brooke were sauntering in College Green. It was a May morning; their arms were interwoven.

George Riseley's arm lay on Alfred's neck, and Alfred's arm rested on George Riseley's waist. Lovingly, like comrades, they sauntered on the pavement.

Lime-leaves trembled in the branches over them; the cathedral wall behind their sun-lit faces made a gray and shadowy background.

Then I knew what jealousy the heart can feel – the jealousy of things we may not share.

To have been a third between them, I would have sold my scholarship, my prizes, my first classes, my fellowship.

6

Shall I speak of a last time? – I stood alone on the bare Durdham Down. By three boundary stones, at the edge of the gully which goes down to the Avon stream, I stood. Alfred passed, smiled, beckoned with his eyes, bade me leave the stones and be with him. But I moved not.

I saw him go; that white face offered to my mouth for kisses, the red lips paling with passion, the splendid eyes and throat athletic and magnificent curve of board square shoulders, and imperial poise of sinewy trunk upon well-knitted hips and thighs.

His dress concealed him not. With my soul's eyes I grasped his body in all its parts. He knew this; and therefore he smiled, beckoned, invited, promised, wooed. For he too was lascivious; my soul was not more lascivious than he; and he had many lovers. Still I suffered him to pass. Wherefore?

...

I cease not to be troubled by Alfred Brooke. In My visions he perturbs me. Oftentimes the beast within roars angrily for that its hunger was not satiated."³⁸

³⁷George Raiselay (1845-1932) became a chorister at Bristol Cathedral in 1852 when he was just seven years old. He was later apprenticed to the cathedral organist, John Davis Corfe. He was appointed organist of Bristol Cathedral upon a Corfe's death in 1876, and was the subject of a biographical essay published in the *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* (1 February 1899)

³⁸p. 195-198.

John makes a little further a comparison between his personal way of seeing the relationship with Alfred and what Alfred really was.

"I do not for a moment doubt that Alfred Brooke lived a far more natural life than I did. I am sure that whatever he may have felt and acted, he remained a healthier man. My conception of him, contaminated by my own unwholesome fancy, would have vanished like a vision at the first touch of physical and moral contact. But this I shrank from for a score of unpractically prudent reasons . And I believe that the picture I have drawn of him as the dream object of my permanent desire is a gross libel upon the flesh-and-blood being he was."³⁹

John complains that he had a relationship more with his image of Alfred than with Alfred himself.

"Would to God that I had fraternized with him! Would to God that I had sought and he had suffered that carnal union, which the world calls sin, but which leads, as I know well, in frequent cases to brotherhood and mutual good services through life. Then I should certainly not have penned these pages, which may, in spite of all I assert to the contrary, cast a shadow of unmerited blame upon him from my own dark and brooding self.

I had been taught that the sort of love I felt for Alfred Brooke was wicked. I had seen that it was regarded with reprobation by modern society. At the same time I knew it to be constitutional, and felt it to be ineradicable. What I attempted to do in these circumstances was to stifle it so far as outward action went. I could not repress it internally any more than I could stop the recurrence of dreams in sleep or annihilate my native instinct for the beauty of the world."⁴⁰

2.9 Scandal at the Magdalen

In the summer of '62, after finishing his studies, John goes on a trip with his father and sister. He visits Austria, reaches Venice, crosses the Simplon and descends into the Rhone valley. On October 27, after winning the competition, he is admitted as a probationary member of the teaching staff of

³⁹p. 202.

⁴⁰p. 203-204.

Magdalen College, he has just turned 22. Shorting, the blond guy perpetually in love with the Magdalen choristers, whom he had met in '59, thinks he can enter Magdalen and can have easier access to the choristers just by virtue of his friendship with Symonds. But "He was regarded by the Dons and the men with aversion and suspicion. Having already intrigued tactlessly and pertinaciously with one of the choristers, Goolden. . . ." ⁴¹

Symonds refuses to introduce Shorting to Magdalen, merely saying that he would give him lessons privately in Shorting's quarters, who responds with an angry letter of protest.

On November 20 Symonds goes to Cobham's Italian class and, holding back to speak with him, learns that Shorting said he could have severely damaged him in his academic career. On October 24, Cobham informs Symonds that Shorting has sent a document defaming him to six interns at Magdalen. Shorting's document contains excerpts from Symonds' private correspondence and his poems but above all claims that Symonds had given him a hand in hunting down the chorister Goolden. John, even though he has a clear conscience, must face a real trial at the Magdalen.

Many big names in Oxford and the whole of England move in favor of Symonds and on December 18 the Magdalen General Council acquits Symonds of all charges, however two letters from Symonds to Shorting are strongly condemned. The members of Magdalen General Council are much more rigid and conservative than those of Balliol especially towards outsiders even if, by law, they were required not to discriminate them.

2.10 First straight attempts

After the end of the bad adventure unleashed by Shorting, John takes a trip to Belgium, his health weakens, but he also begins to write about the Italian Renaissance and therefore to lay the foundations for his future studies. It is precisely in that period that Symonds thinks of turning into a "normal" man:

"I thought that, by honest endeavour, I could divert my passions from the burning channels in which they flowed for Alfred Brooke, and lead them gently to follow a normal course toward women. I neglected the fact that poetry and power of expression and the visionary pomp of dreams awoke in me only beneath the touch of the male genius. I wanted to do right. To be as one of those I loved and honoured, the nobler men I knew around me. Therefore

⁴¹p. 211.

in all simplicity and sober diligence I addressed myself to the task of stimulating a romantic feeling for women."⁴²

The approaches of Mrs Josephine Bulter and Mme Jenny Lind Goldshmidt are unsuccessful.

"These two ladies affected my character at the time when I was resolved to warp the congenital bias of my sexual instinct. Unfortunately neither of them did more than to awake in me an aesthetic sense for feminine beauty and an admiration for female genius and force of character.

For the main purposes of life, it might have been better if I had got me to a brothel, and tried all its inmates by turns. What I needed was excitation of the sexual sense for women, and the awakening to their sexual desirableness, combined with the manifold sympathies, half brutal half tender, which physical congress evokes.

In a dumb blundering way I knew that the egotistical enthusiasms of Mrs Bulter and the grand art of Mme Goldshmidt were not respondent to my needs. I saw through the former, as one sees mere fact through coloured glass. The other evoked my sentiments of comradeship and loyal devotion. Both roused my intellectual curiosity about women. Neither of them touched my sex."⁴³

2.11 Lady Latitia Morrison

"In April 1863, having nothing to do at Clifton, I cast eyed upon a young lady called Letitia.⁴⁴ She was our near neighbour at Clifton. The diary which I am following as a faithful guide in these reminiscences, describes a cool romantic episode connected with this maiden. Her parent would have liked me for a son-in-law. My father threw is weight into the scale against my lukewarm passion. This circumstance fanned the slugging coals of my emotion. I dreamed for four weeks that I should like – might like – could probably come to like, to marry her.

⁴²p. 216.

⁴³p. 217.

⁴⁴Letitia Morrison Malthus (c. 1845-1899) was born in Dartmouth, Devon. By the early 1860s her family resided at 2 Bellevue (a row of terraced houses running parallel to the bottom of Clifton Hill House garden), Malthus's name occurs several times in Symonds's letters to his sister, Charlotte.

The accent of the diary is, nevertheless, quite different in all that concerns her from its pregnant uncouth confidences about Alfred Brooke. I, the good boy, was then undoubtedly endeavouring to fall in love with a girl, and very proud of myself when I thought I had achieved that object. Here is a self-revealing sentence: 'It is much to feel that a woman is my ideal.'

A real woman-lover could not have written that sentence. It shows the honest intention of an abnormal but highly-moralized young man. I never wrote such words about Willie Dyer or Alfred Brooks. Passion in their case, and love, leapt out in simple unreflective utterances."⁴⁵

2.12 Rosa Engel

The story with Letitia, if ever it was a true story, ends quickly and from May 4th her name is no longer present in John's diaries, who on June 25th, '63 leaves for Switzerland.

"In those days there was only one little wooden inn at Mürren, the Silberhorn, kept by Herr Sterchi and his family. Life was very primitive; few people staying in house beside ourselves; troops of tourists coming up from Interlaken to lunch and going noisily away again. The George de Bunsens⁴⁶ were our companions for some while; and while they were still there, an English family arrived. I can remember looking out of Cecil's window, and spying their advent, one bright afternoon in early August. It annoyed us to think that the hotel would now be fuller. 'They were Mr. Frederick North, M. P. for Hastings, and his two daughters' (So runs the diary:)

'Both the young ladies were devoted to sketching. The eldest was blonde, tall, stout, good-humoured, and a little satirical. The second was dark and thin and slight, nervous and full of fun and intellectual acumen. The one seemed manager and mother, the other dreamer and thinker. Neither was remarkable for beauty; but the earnest vivacity of the younger grew upon me, and I could soon have fallen in love with her. Her name was Catherine. Mr.

⁴⁵p. 217.

⁴⁶Georg Friedrich von Bunsen (1824-1896) was the son of Christian Karl Josias von Bunsen, a German diplomat, and was himself a politician.

North is kind and easy-going. They seemed to have travelled in most parts of Europe.'

Such is the entry in my precious priggish diary about the woman whom I was destined to marry.

...

My health revived daily; in spite of frequent drawbacks and persistent trouble in the brain, I grew stronger and lighter-hearted [...] I began spontaneously to love a woman – not Catherine as yet – but Rosa Engel."⁴⁷

Rosa Engel was the daughter of an important jeweller from Thun, although she was in a Swiss inn in Mürren to learn how to manage the company.

"I grew to love her by mere looking, then began to talk, shyly at first, afterwards more freely on the balconies at night. When the housework was over for the day. We spoke in French."⁴⁸

John notes this detail of his departure from the inn where Rosa Engel was staying, on August 9, 1863.

"We wished each other goodbye; and we shook hands. I stole a kiss. The feeling of her lips on mine is still fresh. It was the first time I had ever kissed a woman."⁴⁹

John separates himself from his company and goes to Thun to meet Rosa's parents who are a little embarrassed by that unexpected visit, then walks back to Mürren on August 18 in the pouring rain. He passes two times under Rosa's window, but she stares at him coldly to immediately lower her eyes. John had bought her a book of poems in German which he never gave her and he had also written some verses in German with the help of a friend, which he gives to the girls to give them to Rosa: it is a declaration of love. On August 22 John approaches the place where Rosa is hanging some laundry, the girl before her lowers her eyes then raises them and smiles in greeting. John and Rosa join hands and John tells Rosa about his visit to her home in Thun and brings her greetings from her mother. What was Rosa to John?

"I only know for certain that the image of Rosa remained for a long while after I left Mürren imprinted on my memory, and

⁴⁷p. 222-223.

⁴⁸p. 224.

⁴⁹p. 224.

that I have never been drawn so spontaneously toward any other woman. Yet I doubt whether I was governed by the genuine sexual desire. Only physical possession could have tested this factor in the emotion she inspired. And that of course I never had."⁵⁰

On August 25, John discovers that Rosa is only 15. The idyll with Rosa ends without a real ending.

"I do not detect the right accent of passion in all my romantic broodings on the thought of Rosa. She did not compel me tyrannously, as Alfred Brooke had done. In the very middle of my lures about her, I foresaw the moment when I should leave her by an act of my own will, and she would be to me a gracious memory. Still I recognized the essential distinction between this love for a girl and the love I felt for Alfred Brooke – its superior naturalness and coolness."⁵¹

2.13 The traces of the old flame

John continues to Munich, reunites with a group of friends and reaches Dresden with them where he meets Arthur Sidgwick, the son of his old master of Clifton and enthusiastic about male loves. This is enough for John to see the idyll with Rosa go down and to hear the signs of the ancient flame (*adgnosco veteris vestigia flammae* Aen. IV, 23). Arthur Sidgwick⁵² returns to England with Symonds who was admitted as a full member of the Magdalen. Returning for a short time to Clifton, John leaves for Genoa, where he meets Rutson, then goes to Florence and stays there until December 10, then continues to Rome, where he arrives on December 17. Rutson leaves for England. After some time, John also finally returns to England.

At the beginning of the summer of '64 John found accommodation in London, became interested in art, had a social life, attended concerts and good society, but his health did not assist him, he was visited by Bowman and Acton, and then, on the advice of his father, from Sir Spencer Wells, who prescribes banal palliatives for his ailments and recommends him to pay a mistress or rather to get married.

"That excellent surgeon, whit sound common sense, gave me a simple remedy for my eyes – vinegar and water for lotion, and

⁵⁰p. 227.

⁵¹p. 230.

⁵²Arthur Sidgwick (1840-1920) studied at Trinity college, Cambridge, and was late elected Fellow (1864-1869)

the prospect of recovery through time and perseverance. For my constitution, he recommended cohabitation with a hired mistress, or, what was better, matrimony. He impressed upon me the theory that marriage ought not be regarded as a matter of idealized passion, but as the sober meeting together of man and woman for mutual needs of sex, for fellow service and loyal devotion to the duties of social and domestic life in common."⁵³

That you could pay a female lover to solve your sexual problems seemed to John an acceptable solution for an elderly man but certainly not for a 23-year-old. John instinctively would have been inclined to seek a male friendship.

2.14 The marriage

"But this was just what I had resolved to suppress and overcome. His argument, therefore, made a strong appeal to my reason, when I considered the possibility of a suitable marriage. It seemed to be the one exit from my difficulties; and I found myself supported by my father and Sir Edward Strachey, when I talked the matter over with them. The temptation became powerful to try."⁵⁴

This is how John takes Catherine North's hypothesis into consideration. After mentally working out the plan, John doesn't think too much about it and goes to visit the North house, is invited to dinner and becomes a regular guest of that house. So John says of Catherine:

"The more I saw of her, the more I felt for certain that she was the woman whom I ought to marry for my own sake. I did not foresee the complications of life in such a marriage."⁵⁵

John goes to Clifton to explain his plans to his father, who approves. During a short trip to Norwich he is the guest of an ecclesiastical friend of the family and his wife tries to persuade him to a quick adultery, so John notes:

"I went to Norwich, for some forgotten purpose, and stayed with a clergy-man of our acquaintance.

I must have been in a sexually electrical condition; for his young wife nearly led me to an adulterous *amour* with her. Had it not

⁵³p. 257.

⁵⁴p. 257.

⁵⁵p. 258.

been for my constitutional repugnance for mere sexual acts with women whom I did not love emotionally, there is no doubt that I should have possessed her. The force of passion was in me, and the will to yield in her. And if she had been a male, some act would have been performed. As it was, the erethism caused by her presence and voluptuous incitements only disturbed my nervous system and repelled me with a disgust for her person. It is necessary to write this down; for it paints, better than any analysis, the division at that time between sexual appetite in me (which was not natural and carnal, like Tom Jones's, for a female), and emotional sympathies and aspirations leading me to seek a woman for my life comrade. For a long time previously, I had treated the purely sexual appetite (that which drew me fatally to the male) as the beast to be suppressed and curbed, and latterly to be down-trampled by the help of surgeons and their cautery of sexual organs."⁵⁶

He leaves alone to reach the North at the beginning of August 1864; after a long journey he joined them in Pontresina, a Swiss town in the Canton of Grisons. He meets Catherine and starts dating her, finally asking her to marry him. After the marriage request, John obtains from Catherine's parents that he can go alone with her on the Pitz Languard. There they exchanged engagement rings. John felt that he loved Catherine with ardor.

"I loved her ardently, and felt the thrill of something wonderful and new intruding into my existence. But was it not too pure, too spiritual too etherialized, this exquisite emotion? It would endure till death, I knew. But I missed something in the music – the coarse and hard vibrations of sex, those exquisite agonies of contact, by which the God in man subsumes into himself the beast and makes that god-like. These vibrations I had felt in dreams for male beings, and in intercourse with Willie.

Not discovering them now, some qualms came over me. Was my love perfect for her, such a holocaust of self as she had a right to expect? The doubt troubled me. But I turned the thoughts to Dante and his Beatrice, and told my heart it did not signify. Better was it to love as I felt capable of loving her. Nevertheless, a word, dropped in my ear just before we left Pontresina, troubled my security. My old friend Charles Knight⁵⁷, the painter,

⁵⁶p. 258-259.

⁵⁷Third son of Symonds's childhood tutor, Rev. William Knight. He was a 'marine and landscape painter'

happened to be there. He knew, as all the English people knew, of our engagement. Penetratively and reflectively he said: 'The one thing in marriage is passion; without passion no man has the right to make a woman his wife.' Just the same words said a Davos peasant-lad to me last night, '*Die Beiden sollten lieben, heftig lieben*'.⁵⁸ Sexual passion, at the commencement of nuptial love, is tot demanded of a woman; but it is demanded of a man. And while I had everything else, and have always had everything else to give Catherine – if needful, I would die for her willingly – I could not so conquer the original bent of my instincts as to feel for her the brutal unmistakable appetite of physical desire. It must be added that I doubt whether this appetite ever entered into her affection for me.

Only to this extent has our union been imperfect. But all the difficulties of my subsequent life, and a large part of hers, have come from our not having originally started with a strong sexual attraction on either side."⁵⁹

2.15 Lack of sex education

From Switzerland, John together with the North goes to Venice, then across the Italian lakes to Turin, to then return to England. The wedding is celebrated in Hastings on November 10, 1864 and is gorgeous, because North is a member of parliament. Also present is the Duke of Cleveland. After the wedding, John and Catherine go to Brighton. John faces his wedding night. So he tells the facts:

"I had never had anything at all to do with any woman in the way of sex. I had only a vague notion about the structure of the female body. I had never performed any sexual act with anyone, and I did not know how to go about it. I firmly expected that some extraordinary and ecstatic enthusiasm would awake in me at the mere contact of a woman's body in bed, although I was aware that the presence of women did not disturb my senses in the ballroom or a carriage. I also anticipated that nature would take care of herself when it came to the consummation of marriage. To my surprise and annoyance, I felt myself rather uncomfortable than otherwise by the side of my wife, oppressed with shyness,

⁵⁸These two should love, should love passionately.

⁵⁹p. 260-261.

and not at all carried away by passionate enthusiasm. Dearly as I loved her, and ardently as I desired through marriage to enter into the state of normal manhood, I perceived that this thing which we had to do together was not what either of us imperatively required. I felt no repugnance at first, but no magnetic thrill of attraction. A deep sense of disappointment came over me when I found that the *'corps féminin, qui tant est tendre, poly, souef, si précieux'*⁶⁰ did not exercise its hoped-for magic. What was worse, nature refused to show me how the act should be accomplished. This was due to no defect in me. The organ of sex was vigorous enough and ready to perform its work. My own ineptitude prevented me for several nights from completing the marital function; and at last I found the way by accident – after having teased and hurt both my wife and myself, besides suffering dismally from the humiliating absurdity of the situation. She afterwards told me that such manifest proofs of my virginity were agreeable to her. But all the romance and rapture of sexual intercourse, on which I had so fondly counted, were destroyed by this sordid experience. I also discovered that the physical contact of a woman, though it did not actually disgust me, left me very cold. There was something in it nauseous, and cohabitation in my case meant only the mechanical relief of nature."⁶¹

Symonds criticizes the total lack of youth sex education which can cause disasters:

"We do all that lies in us to keep them chaste, to develop and refine their sense oh shame, while we leave them to imagine what they like about the nuptial connection. Then we fling them naked into bed together, modest, alike ignorant, mutually embarrassed by the awkward situation, trusting that they will blunder upon the truth by instinct. We forget that this is a dangerous test of their affection and their self-respect; all the more dangerous in proportion as they are highly cultivated, refined, and sensitive."⁶²

Symonds's reflection on his marriage is very significant:

"I was born with strong but slowly matured sexual appetites; and these were incapable of finding their satisfaction with a woman.

⁶⁰Feminine body, which is so tender, smooth, soft, so precious - From de prefatory poem of "Le Testament" (1461) by Francois Villon

⁶¹p. 274-275.

⁶²p. 275.

Nuptial intercourse developed them by the exercise of reproductive organs. It did not and could not divert them from their natural bias toward the male."⁶³

2.16 Sexual interest in men is always present

One evening in the spring of '65 something happens that disturbs John a lot:

"Walking home before midnight, I took a little passage which led from Trafalgar into Leicester Square, passing some barracks. This passage has since then been suppressed. I was in evening dress. At the entrance of the alley a young grenadier came up and spoke to me. I was too innocent, strange as this may seem, to guess what he meant. But I liked the man's looks, felt drawn toward him, and did not refuse his company. So there I was, the slight nervous man of fashion in my dress-clothes, walking side by side with a strapping fellow in scarlet uniform, strongly attracted by his physical magnetism. From a few commonplace remarks he broke abruptly into proposals, mentioned a house we could go to, and made it quite plain for what purpose. I quickened my pace, and hurrying through the passage broke away from him with a passionate mixture of repulsion and fascination. What he offered was not what I wanted at the moment, but the thought of it stirred me deeply. The thrill of contact with the man taught me something new about myself. I can well recall the lingering regret, and the quick sense of deliverance from danger, which I saw him fall back, after following and pleading with me for about a hundred yards. The longing left was partly a fresh seeking after comradeship and partly an animal desire the like of which I had not before experienced."⁶⁴

Towards autumn a second episode occurs:

"I went out for a solitary walk on one of those warm moist unhealthy afternoons when the weather oppresses and yet irritates our nervous sensibility. Since the date of my marriage I had ceased to be assailed by what I called 'the wolf' - that undefined craving coloured with a vague but poignant hankering after males.

⁶³p.276.

⁶⁴p. 365-366.

I lulled myself with the belief that it would not leap on me again to wreck my happiness and disturb my studious habits. However, wandering that day for exercise through the sordid streets between my home and Regent's Park. I felt burden of a ponderous malaise. To shake it off was impossible. I did not recognize it as a symptom of the moral malady from which I had resolutely striven to free myself. Was I not protected by my troth-pledge to a noble woman, by my recent entrance upon the natural carrier of married life? While returning from this fateful constitutional, at a certain corner, which I well remember, my eyes were caught by a rude *graffito* scrawled with slate-pencil upon slate. It was of so concentrated, so stimulative, so penetrative a character – so thoroughly the voice of vice and passion in the proletariat – that pierced the very marrow of my soul.⁶⁵ I must have seen a score such *graffiti* in my time. But they had no hitherto appealed to me. Now the wolf leapt out. My malaise of the moment was converted into clairvoyant and tyrannical appetite for the thing which I had rejected five months earlier in the alley by the barracks. The vague and morbid craving of my previous years defined itself as a precise hunger after sensual pleasure, whereof I had not dreamed before save in repulsive visions of the night. It is difficult to say how far the exercise of sex in marriage helped to determine this new phase of the old instinct. I am inclined to think that it had much to do with acuteness of the attack. Inborn instincts, warped by my will and forced to take a bias contrary to my peculiar nature, reasserted themselves with violence. I did not recognize the phenomenon as a temptation. It appeared to me, just what it was, the resurrection of a chronic torment which had been some months in abeyance. Looking back upon the incident now, I know that that obscene *graffito* was the sign and the symbol of a paramount and permanent craving of my physical and psychical nature. It connected my childish reveries with the mixed passions and audacious comradeship of my maturity. Not only my flesh, but my heart also, was involved in the emotion which it stirred. The awakening spasm of desire had as little to do with either fancy or will as the return of neuralgia in a sudden throb of agony. God help me! I cried. I felt humiliated, frightened, gripped in the clutch of doom. Nothing remained but to

⁶⁵Marginal note: - "Prick to prick so sweet"; with an emphatic diagram of phallic meeting, glued together, gushing.-

parry, palliate, procrastinate. There was no hope of escape. And all the while the demon ravished my imagination with 'the love of the impossible'. Hallucinations of the senses crowded in upon my brain together with the pangs of shame and the prevision of inevitable woes. From this decisive moment forward to the end, my life had to fly on a broken wing, and my main ambition has been to constitute a working compromise."⁶⁶

2.17 Culture and sexuality

In the winter of 1865, John and Catherine settle in London and their eldest daughter is born on October 22. Shortly before Christmas, the couple moves to Clifton and John's father visits him and finds him with serious lung problems in the upper part of his left lung.

The marriage between John and Catherine, despite John's homosexuality, is a real marriage, there is no sexual passion between the two but there is no lack of respect and sincere affection. The effort to improve themselves and to try to establish concrete mutual support is considerable on the part of both spouses who deeply respect each other and accept their family duties with the utmost dedication for the good of the other.

Some pages of Catherine's diary are the clearest manifestation of this. To facilitate John's recovery, the spouses move to Menton. Catherine's sister had a villa in Sanremo and in Sanremo the doctors confirm John's recovery, a long tour of Italy follows, from the Riviera to Florence, Ravenna, Macugnaga, the Aosta Valley and, after a short visit at Mürren, the couple returns to England.

In the summer of '67 and throughout the following year John began writing poetry again, all dedicated to male love. After the birth of her second daughter, Catherine and John live without sex, Catherine is terrified of a possible third pregnancy. Forced abstinence from conjugal sex pushes John more and more towards fantasies of male love and risks putting marriage in crisis, the spouses therefore begin to have sexual intercourse again trying to avoid conception. The third pregnancy comes unexpected.

John gets up early in the morning to go see naked men and boys bathing in the Serpentine and for the same reason he goes to public baths. But he also has two homosexual friends who influence him greatly, far beyond Whitman's reading: Rocen Noel and Claude Delaval Cobham:

"They had done and were in the habit of doing what I had now

⁶⁶p. 366-367.

begun to desire."⁶⁷

Noel was married, cultured, philosopher, poet.

"He was vain of his physical beauty, which was splendid at that epoch; and his tastes tended to voluptuousness. The attraction of the male governed him through his vanity and his voluptuousness. He loved to be admired. He enjoyed in indolent sultana fashion the contact of masculine desire, the *attouchements* of excited organisms, the luxurious embracements of nakedness."⁶⁸

Cobham, whom John had met in Oxford in '61, did not deal with either religion or philosophy, he called himself "anderastes"⁶⁹ and consistently always remained so.

Sometimes John's desire for male love gets hot:

"I have in my heart's ear a couplet of Theognis:

'Happy the one who exercises love-making (or, the lover who exercises), and returning home sleeps with a beautiful boy all day long.'⁷⁰

This is thine, O man, to do! To supple strong limbs in not ignoble toil, to take fair limbs in amorous embrace, to sleep half-waking through long afternoons with beauty lulled upon thy bosom, thinking no wrong the while, and doing none, but cherishing thy youth with sweetness. [omissis] Yes, this afternoon I held Lycidas upon the down of beds of dreaming. The bed is ready, embroidered silk, with either-down for underprop of delicate flesh. Fair is the form of an eighteen-year-old boy still wearing the chlamys.⁷¹ Him a clasped slumbering very sweetly in the gates of dreams, and from his parted lips I drank the balm of slumber. I was Hypnos gazing on Endymion in the cave of Latmos. Golden hair, and white neck, and breasts brighter than tween stars, and belly softer than the down of doves, and dewy thighs, and awful beauty of love's minister beneath the tuft of crispy curls, and slender swelling legs, and rosy feet, and long lithe languid arms. I had them all pressed to my body there, flank to flank – kissed

⁶⁷p. 371.

⁶⁸p. 371.

⁶⁹Lover of men.

⁷⁰Theognis: 2. 1335-6

⁷¹From the Greek Anthology 12.125, attributed to Meleager and recounting a sexual dream. A chlamys was a short cloak worn exclusively by men, pinned at one shoulder and sometimes used as an over-garment.

every part and member of the lad – with wandering hand tasted them one by one, and felt the fervor of smooth buttocks glowing and divine. In a daydream: O Jupiter!"⁷²

2.18 Temptations and vain struggle

John describes this way a conference he attended:

"I sat in a lecture room, and listened to a rhetorician droning out dull periods with a deadened voice upon the familiar topic of the Dramatists I love so well. Yet the hour was not all barred of delight; for you, dear unknown boy, sat beside me, delicately made, with crisp hair curling down your forehead. Laughter dwelt in your eyes, and you looked as though you longed to be merry. We touched each other. Little by little I used him to the feeling of my hand upon his thigh and knee. The tremors of his body run magnetically through my right arm. I was penetrated with the streams of electricity that flowed from him. We exchanged no words. I do not even know the boy's name."⁷³

To try to break away from the frenzied writing of homosexual poetry, John devotes himself to translating Zeller's volumes on Aristotle. He writes to Henry Sidgwick talking about a great shadow that still threatens him by adding in brackets (my sexual difficulties) then cites Dante and the "*mal protesi nervi*" (Inferno XV, 114): Dante's canto cited is the one in which Brunetto Latini appears and which deals with homosexuality.

It is evident that John is fully aware of what his problem is but he mentions it in a letter to his friend only in a very light way and difficult to understand for those who are not familiar with Dante and the Italian language.

Under the thrust of the amorous passion against which it seemed not only useless but deleterious to fight, John begins to detach himself from religion, from the trappings of academic culture and to rediscover the true meaning of intellectual work, as an autonomous search for reality.

"When the moment came for inclination to assume her sway over my nature, then criticism, intellectual work, moral relations immediately regained the meaning of reality. They fell into their proper places. The man was restored to such health and energy

⁷²p. 313.

⁷³p. 314.

as he could hope for after the exhausting errors of his earlier pilgrimage. But this clearing up of my subjective atmosphere had yet no wait. It was nearly three years before the clouds began to roll away under the keen breezes of what I still condemned as sin."⁷⁴

He begins to write an essay on Greek love but leaves it unfinished.

"The subject appeals too deeply to my sympathies, while its more repulsive aspects are painful."⁷⁵

While in Cannes, he goes into a deep crisis and ponders suicide but then puts the idea aside:

"Death is not acceptable; it offers no solution. I loathe myself, and turn in every direction to find strength. What I want is life; the source of life fails me. I try to rest upon my will and patience. Doing so, I faint; for there is no force in me to keep the resolves I form, and no content to make me acquiesce in present circumstances. When I attempt to drown my self-scorn in mental work, my nerves give way beneath me, and the last state is worse than the first."⁷⁶

He meditates in anguish on the fear of death and on his own sloth, on the hypothesis of calling the name of God, he lets himself be devoured by religious scruples:

"I am as foul as one who as wallowed in carnal vices, albeit I refrained from acts."⁷⁷

The word sin, however, begins to perplex him:

"Through the whole of my malady and my discourses on it, I had omitted the word Love. That was because I judged my own sort of love to be sin. But when, in the state of indifference, I became careless about sinning, then, end not until then, I discovered the love, the keystone of all the rest of my less tortured life."⁷⁸

⁷⁴p. 318.

⁷⁵p. 340.

⁷⁶p. 341.

⁷⁷p. 343.

⁷⁸p.343-344.

Throughout 1868, John was developing a state of indifference in the face of the idea of sin. Catherine supports her husband in difficult times and their human relationship is strengthened. But the fixed idea of male love does not abandon John:

"I find, by notes in my diaries, that the congenital bent of my temperament was perpetually causing me uneasiness. All kinds of young men – peasants on the Riviera, Corsican drivers, Florentine lads upon Lungarno in the evenings, *facchini* at Venice, and especially a handsome Bernese guide who attended to the strong black horse I rode – used to pluck at the sleeve of my heart, inviting me to fraternize, drawing out of me the sympathy I felt for male beauty and vigour. The sustained resistance to these appeals, the prolonged reversion to mere study as an anodyne for these desires, worried my nerves; and sometimes I broke out rebelliously into poems of passionate longing."⁷⁹

He writes a long three-part poem entitled "Phallus impudicus". The first part is connected to the discovery in the countryside of a phalloid amanita (a mushroom in the shape of a human penis). This image calls something for John of trivial and nauseating.

John's metamorphosis into a free man is not yet complete. In the second part the change could not be more radical. John and a young man from Sorrento who had driven his carriage into the city are housed in Naples in two adjoining rooms separated only by a door. The night passed, then towards dawn:

"The door stood open: in I passed, and bent.
 Attentive on the mat before his bed.
 What should I find? Tossed waves of tawny curls
 Dashed from his broad brows, or full fervent eyes
 Veiled by large eyelids, or the yellowing bloom
 Of three years' manhood soft on cheek and chin,
 With haply from the coverlid some flake
 Snow-white of strong smooth throat? Ah no! The dawn
 Bared me full-length within the curtains shadow
 From feet to brow a languid-laying form,
 Swathed in deep slumber: thighs and rosy nipples,
 Elastic belly, and soft sheltering velvet,
 Short clustering down, luxuriantly wanton
 Round the twin marble man-spheres shyly circling,

⁷⁹p. 347.

Round the firm rondure of love's root of joy,
 The smooth rude muscle, calm and slow and tender,
 The alabaster shaft, the pale pink shrine,
 The crimson glory of the lustrous gland
 Lurking in dewy darkness half-concealed,
 Like a rose-bud peeping from clasped silken sheath:
 All this I saw; one arm along the flank
 Out-stretched in ease, the other raised half-hidden
 In the curls' fiery tangle. Only this:
 Then to his slumber turned the youth, and sighed."⁸⁰

He adds shortly after:

"from that day I nurse a deathless fire [...]
 Do you loathe me? Curse me? I smile and care not. Spurn and
 shun me? Let all the world be sane; count me as madman! Have
 I not seen, felt, fingered, tasted? lo, ye are the madmen; it is I
 am sound."⁸¹

The third part of the poem presents a Venetian scene. A handsome man of less than 40 years is leaning against the parapet of a bridge in Venice, he is anxious, nervous, every now and then someone, regardless of the man on the bridge, would turn to urinate against the wall and the eyes of the man on the bridge burn and his muscles tense to catch a brief image of his penis. While John wonders what pleasure that man can derive from such an elementary fact, a guy passes under the bridge and stops, the man quickly descends from the bridge and takes his hand. They start talking. The young man blushes, frowns, says no, but in the end he goes away with the man who had stopped him.

We are not dealing here with lyrical sublimations mediated by Greek culture but with homosexual poetry without reservations and without rhetoric, which indicates that by now John has completed his metamorphosis. In the following months John wrote other homosexual-themed poems without any scruples of moralistic nature and also many essays of various kinds, descriptive and critical.

Up to this point, let's say until November 1868, at just 28 years old, John has a family, a wife and two daughters, is very well established in the academic world and is inserted in good society, in practice he has everything that a man of his age may wish. In the first period of his marriage he did everything to crush his homosexuality but over the years the desire for male

⁸⁰p. 348-349.

⁸¹p.349-350.

loves has reappeared and after a long process of acceptance necessary to face reality and to free himself from the moralistic bonds that held him back, John realizes that he is no longer the same and that he cannot deny further his nature.

2.19 Norman

On December 1, 1868, John's life goes to a radical turning point, his friend Graham Dakyns, a professor at Clifton College, invites Symonds to dinner, a professor from the same school, E. M. Oakley and three guys from the last class of Clifton College are also invited: Norman, Bean and Howlett. John first meets Norman, who had not yet turned 19. In this regard, he notes the beginning of an epigram by Straton in his diary:⁸²

"And do you seek payment, teachers? How ungrateful!"

John's brain is set in motion and John conceives the idea of teaching Greek literature to the boys of Clifton College. Percival, the rector of the school, agrees. Graham (Dakyns) suggests the theme of the course: describe a Greek young guy who responds to his lover and lives a noble life with him. John before the end of December writes 'Eudiades - June days and nights in Athens' and gives the manuscript to Dakyns, who had suggested the idea to him. On January 15, 1869, Margaret, John's third daughter, was born. The next day Henry Sidgwick arrives and John makes him read his erotic poems. Sidgwick argues that they must be destroyed because they are unhealthy and immoral. John agrees and the poems, except for Eudiades whose manuscript now belonged to Dakyns, are locked in a metal box and Sidgwick throws the key in the Avon on January 23. It should be noted that the poems were not destroyed but only closed in a box. If from the outside it may seem that John accepted Sidgwick's moralistic advice, in essence he was already fascinated by Norman. On January 27 he writes in his diary:

"Norman dined with me alone: 'most beauteous, wild, insincere'
[the last three words in Greek]."⁸³

From John's diary it is observed that he cares nothing about poems closed in the box, because the phase of poetry as an escape valve is now over and he certainly cannot pour the new wine into those old wineskins.

Norman often goes to dinner at John's house, they meet at school, in the

⁸²Palatine Anthology XII. 219.

⁸³p. 382.

library, they start exchanging letters. Norman responds quickly, John eagerly awaits the answers.

John sets out to educate Norman, he chooses the passages to read, Greek and English, but in reality these are only occasions created specifically to be able to enjoy Norman's company privately. He writes on February 7:

"As he read, I leaned on his shoulder, and his ear tip touched my forehead, and I felt his voice vibrate in his lungs and I could see the subtle smile upon his lips"⁸⁴

John knows that duty would require him not to go further and indeed to keep his distance but he also knows that he will not. As Norman and John's confidence grows, John realizes that Norman falls more or less sentimentally in love with this or that college friend of his and John's jealousy awakens.

"Norman continued to be much about the house. My wife did not take to him greatly. She was not exactly jealous of him then, though she became so afterwards, as was only natural."⁸⁵

John behaves correctly with Norman and the real dimension of his interest, in theory at least, is not revealed on the outside, but John, even though he now had three daughters, has made some friends read his erotic poems with a homosexual theme, and it is very unlikely that Catherine has not begun to have some suspicion that the relationship between John and Norman is not the typical relationship between a student and his teacher. Sidgwick meets Symonds again, invites him to be very cautious in setting up the Greek literature course and to use a tone that does not indulge too much in emotional tendencies. Dakyns shows 'Eudiades' to Sidgwick who considers it "degrading to whoever wrote and whoever reads"⁸⁶ It is debated whether to burn 'Eudiades'. John notes Sidgwick's inconsistency in approving other erotic poems on a homosexual topic.

Caught in these discussions, John does not notice that Norman hasn't visited him for a long time, then learns that Norman has mumps. Offended, however, at not having been warned, he writes a letter to Norman to debunk the meaning of their relationship.

Shortly after April 10, John has a conversation with his wife in which he deals directly with the subject of Norman. Catherine acknowledges that John's health has improved since he met Norman and is aware of her husband's penchant for male loves. John, however, is committed to maintaining

⁸⁴p. 383.

⁸⁵p. 386.

⁸⁶p. 387.

relations with Norman within the limits of common sense and good taste. The relationship with his wife is clear and both are interested first of all not to put the family in crisis.

On April 20 John goes to Cambridge, Sidgwick's guest at Trinity, and has him read his diary. Sidgwick's answer is clear-cut:

"It fills me with terror and pain. I admire your spiritual gifts so much, the versatility of your intellectual interests, your power of poetizing life. But this tread of etherealized sensuality."⁸⁷

John had pledged to see Norman in London and the two, from April 24, spent six days together, alone in the big house in Norfolk Square.

There is an understanding between the two and not only on an intellectual level. On April 30, John writes down:

"Last night: *summa cacumina tetigi, in meis obdormivit brachiis, non sine basiis frequentissimis*⁸⁸

They then return to Bristol together. Norman goes to an aunt and John meets Catherine on May 2, they talk about Norman. John notes in his diary:

"Catherine and I talked long together about Norman and about our life during our walk upon those Heavenly hills. I told her how I felt adequate to living a life of passion without the flesh and to meeting the difficulty of celibacy in marriage. (We had resolved on that, though it proved impossible in the sequel to adhere continuously to our resolution) Never again must we be as we were last spring in Italy – companionless, uncomforted, though side by side – dragged down by the burdens of the flesh. (That was when she was suffering acutely under the gloom and depression of pregnancy.) She is not made to be a companion to me, and to be a child-bearing woman at the same time. But now she will be a companion in the highest sense, when she is relieved of these necessities. She comprehends the situation and understands me completely about Norman – probably because I understand myself."⁸⁹

⁸⁷p. 391.

⁸⁸I touched the highest height. He slept in my arms, not without most frequent kisses - p. 392.

⁸⁹p. 392-393.

The interview essentially also leads to an agreement that John and Catherine would no longer have sex because Catherine absolutely wanted to avoid a fourth pregnancy. After the interview, however, John feels that something has changed:

"She could not help being jealous of Norman, especially when she found some letters written by me to him in strains of passion I had never used to her. On my side, I was exposed to perturbations of the senses and the inconveniences of sexual abstinence while encouraging my love for Norman. Nevertheless, I did not break the promise I had made and though I desired him sensuously, I slipped into nothing base."⁹⁰

On May 8, John begins Greek literature lessons in the sixth grade which continued throughout the term and for another two years. Many of Clifton's students later became friends with John, often dined with him, discussed with him.

"Though I dearly loved them, and felt the physical charm of one or another, I entered into no relations like that I had begun with Norman. The duties of a teacher prevented this; and besides, I felt that it would be a mistake to repeat what I gradually came to recognize as more or less a failure. Consequently these friendships grew up without jealousies, sentimentalities, and etherealized sensualities."⁹¹

At one point, relations with Norman seem to cool down, the guy goes to Clifton Hill House less and then falls in love with another guy. John thinks he can tie Norman to himself but Norman is not the type to be tied up, he is affectionate and generous but it is not possible to shape him or induce him to follow other ideals. The relationship with Norman, even in the waning phase, is a subject of discussion with Catherine, but the moments of storm overcame. Relations with Norman also improve, John complains of having as much physical proximity with him as he could wish but of not getting the spiritual proximity that he would have desired. In July he leaves with Norman for a long journey across the continent:

"We were alone and enjoyed ourselves as much as we had done in London. The good times returned. I have many pleasant memories and records of that journey – the little wooden rooms

⁹⁰p. 393.

⁹¹p. 394.

of inns in which we slept together, generally in the same bed [...] the sleepy voluptuous days at Axenstein; the kisses and embracements and the long delicious hours between walking and sleeping ... "92

So John notes in Latin in his diary on the date of August 21:

*"Jam summa cacumina voluptatis tetigi, et flosculos quales desiderabam plena manu in gremium recepi. Hic tamen morari nequeo. Flores flammiferi, in cineresque abituri, cor cordium ne comburant graviter metuo."*⁹³

John returns to Clifton on September 4. Conington was dead, Catherine had gone to Hastings to assist her dying father, John rushes to her, arrives on September 29, when his father-in-law has been dead for an hour. After the funeral John returns to Clifton and resumes his lessons. John's father is also ill and moves to Brighton. John also has another piece of news that he basically expects. Norman got an Oxford scholarship at Balliol, he'll have to go there at the start of the Lent term. John writes essays, prepares lessons, lives in society, receives his students at home, often sees Norman and notes down in Greek in his diary: "kisses sweeter than honey".⁹⁴ Meanwhile, the day of Norman's departure was approaching. Before leaving, Norman spent two days at Clifton Hill House with John and John's diary of January 28, 1870 allows us to understand the state of mind of the two in that situation:

"I have had two perfect midnight hours with him: one on each of the two past nights. The house was still; the windows of his room were curtained; the fire burned dim, but warm; a candle shaded from our eyes gave twilight, so that we could see. We lay covered from the cold in bed, tasting the honey of softly spoken words and the blossoms of lips pressed on lips. Oh, the strain of those delicate slight limbs and finely moulded breasts – the melting stately throat into the exquisite slim shoulders – as of the genius of the Vatican- the 'most beauteous breast, like a statue'⁹⁵. I find it hard to write of these things; yet I wish to dwell on them and

⁹²p. 397-398.

⁹³Now I have touched the highest height of pleasure, and I received with a full hand into my lap that type of little flower which I used to desire. However I can't delay here. I greatly fear that the flame-bearing flowers, about to disappear into ashes, might burn up my heart of hearts. - p. 398.

⁹⁴p. 399.

⁹⁵In Greek

to recall them . . .

I stripped him naked, and fed sight, touch and mouth on all these things. Will my lips ever forget their place upon his breast, or on the tender satin of his flank, or on the snowy whiteness of his belly? Will they lose the nectar of his mouth – those opened lips like flower petals expanding 'neath their touch and fluttering? Will my arms forger the strain of his small fragile waist, my thighs the pressure of his yielding thighs, my ears the murmur of his drowsy voice, my brain the scent of his sweet flesh and breathing mouth? Shall I ever cease to ear the metallic throb of his mysterious heart – calm and true – ringing little bells beneath my ear?

I do not know whether, after all, the mere touch of his fingers as they met and clasped and put aside my hand, was not of all the best. For there is the soul in the fingers. They speak. The body is but silent, a dumb eloquent animated work of art made by the divine artificer.

Beneath his armpits he has no hair. The flesh of his throat and breast is white as ivory. The nipples of his breasts are hardly to be seen; they are so lost in whiteness and so soft. Between them on the breastbone, is a spot of dazzling brightness, like snow on marble that has felt the kisses of the sun.

His lips are narrow, hardened where the muscles brace the bone, but soft as down and sleek as satin in the hollows of the groin. Shy and modest, tender in the beauty bloom of ladhood, is his part of sex 'already yearning for love'⁹⁶ – fragrant to the searching touch, yet shrinking: for when the wandering hand rests there, the lad turns pleading into my arms as though he sought to be relieved of some delicious pang. [. . .] Now come the nonchalances and superb abandon of repose. How his head dropped on the shoulder, and how his arm lay curved along flank and thigh, and how upon the down of dawning manhood lay his fingers, and how the shrinking god was covered by his hand!

. . . And now there is an end. Norman will breathe the same air with me no more. His bed in the upper chamber of the house upon the Downs knows him no more. He is a Scholar of Balliol; into Oxford rooms and walks and gardens he will carry his perfume (as of some white violet) for other men. [. . .] I wander whether, one moment, he will wish for me – for my arms making

⁹⁶In Greek.

him worm, for my soft speeches wooing sleep!"⁹⁷

Symonds is keen to make a strong emphasis to avoid distorted interpretations of the lyricism of the last night:

"In spite of the more than etherealized sensuality of the passionate farewell to Norman on his way into the world, which I have just transcribed, it is a fact that neither then, nor afterwards, nor before, did any of those things take place between us which people think inseparable from love of this sort. I was content with contemplation, contact, kissing, the candor with which I have set down everything about myself, and the admission which I here make of having at a later period indulged in such acts with other men, ought be sufficient guarantee of my truthfulness."⁹⁸

2.20 Homosexuality in English schools

It is appropriate at this point to open a small digression on a question of not secondary importance if we want to understand more fully the climate in which John and Norman had found themselves. Edward Lyttelton (1855-1942), in 1877, privately published his pamphlet "The causes and prevention of immorality in schools" through the Social Purity Alliance. Lyttelton had long direct experience of England's most prestigious school circles, where he had taught. However, his ideas circulated in the academic world even before the publication of the pamphlet. Lyttelton argued that what he called a "dual vice" that is the homosexual relationship between two boys was always a consequence of the "solitary vice" that is masturbation, but beyond these abstract evaluations, Lyttelton notes that among the students of the English schools the homosexuality is widespread and must be prevented. One wonders, therefore, whether it can derive in particular from study programs and above all from those of Greek literature that seem to encourage in that direction.

John quotes a letter from Norman dated November 26, 1886 in which Norman, in response to a request from John, gives his point of view on the matter. Norman recalls that among school children the term "spooning" is used with the meaning of hugging in bed, kissing, hugging each other affectionately.

Norman specifies that it may be something not dangerous, today we would say done without malice, but the same term can indicate real sexual relations

⁹⁷p. 399-401 - January 28, 1870.

⁹⁸p. 401.

or worse, aggression. Norman believes that the idea that spooning can derive from solitary vice is not very credible and he tells us that he is almost sure that if one considers a great college of Jesus Christs, 'spooning' would not be unknown even there.

Norman believes that non-sexual 'spooning' is not only inevitable but desirable, to avoid the sexual or worse the aggressive form, he suggests a school program full of activities, which requires serious commitment and constant exercise. In any case, it would be useful to warn children by making them understand the health consequences of very free sexual behaviour. It is not very clear what consequences are alluded to, that is, whether it is true sexually transmitted diseases or completely unscientific prejudices but very widespread at the time.

Norman then talks about his personal situation:

"My own case in this matter was not perhaps an isolated one. Corrupted at a very early age by a Harrow eleven-boy who came over to Ashborne to play a cricket match, and invited to his house by him where I stayed two or three days, nights were more to the point, and by him introduced to a sense of what one was made of, for years I never could throw off a perfect lust for being spooned. I regarded every big boy as a possible admirer – and when I got bigger myself I regarded every small boy as a possible spoon. A most pandemic state. The combined influence of Percival⁹⁹ and yourself¹⁰⁰ did something to cure me of this - but here you see is another case where the pailerastic instinct (if it can be so dignified to be called pailerastic) was not only in any way caused by the reading of Greek literature, but was rather chastened and directed by the literary education. I dare say I have told you all this before but it seems to me a case which Lyttleton might be glad to get hold of, if he could,- but God forbid he ever should -
... "¹⁰¹

The letter concludes by recalling that it is a very private thing.

⁹⁹The Rector of Clifton College

¹⁰⁰John.

¹⁰¹p. 541

2.21 Developments in the relationship with Norman

Basically Norman, 16 years after joining Balliol, recognized that John's influence had been healthy.

John and Norman continue to write and see each other during the holidays. In the summer of 72 they go on a trip together to Switzerland and Italy, but now the time for loving caresses has passed.

John's diary of June 21, 1872, after describing a wonderfully clear moonlit night, continues:

"There, on such a night, in a such a scene, Catherine took Norman to her heart, and pledged herself to love him like a son. She knows everything about him and me. We have both suffered much through him – she most – but she has born and believed all; and now she has accepted him with more than toleration"¹⁰²

John had witnessed the conciliation of opposites. Norman became a professor, got married and was the father of a family.

So John briefly evaluates his story with Norman twenty years later:

"I am able to perceive very clearly that the real malady of my nature was not in the passion I felt for him, but in the self-conscious morbid and sophisticated way in which the passion expressed itself. The passion was natural; and he responded to it naturally, so far as temperament, age and constitution of his emotional self permitted."¹⁰³

2.22 The soldier and the male brothel

Regarding the period between '74 and '77, characterized by literary engagements and travels. In the winter of 75-76 John wrote a large part of the second volume of "Renaissance in Italy" which is considered one of his major works.

"Throughout this period, which I have been rapidly describing in its insignificant external aspects, my physical troubles remained almost wholly in abeyance. I made no new romantic friendships,

¹⁰²p. 402.

¹⁰³p. 403.

though I felt at times the inclination to begin again the bitter-sweet experience of love with one or other of the boys about the college. Work and my position of trust restrained me. On foreign journeys I occasionally felt drawn toward some attractive youth; but I did not indulge in the passing fancy, only suffered from its pang. Once in the park I went with a young soldier, and touched the man immodestly. This yielding to abnormal impulse pained my conscience with a terrible sense of danger and impending ruin, which I expressed in the poem called 'The Valley of Vain Desires' and which translated itself unconsciously into mysticism while I was under the influence of anesthetics. I also used to draw from nude man models, satisfying my delight in the beauty of the masculine form. Yet, though I was once upon the verge of yielding to the fascination of a ship's carpenter – and the man thoroughly understood my passion. – I succeeded in controlling my appetite. Only with Noel and Cobham, when they came to stay with me, I now and then gave way to lust – and always suffered from intense reactions."¹⁰⁴

"In the winter of 1875-1876 my health as usual began to fail. Dr Beddoe recommended me to go to the Riviera."¹⁰⁵

After a few months spent in Italy, John returns to London

"... and as it happened, an acquaintance of old standing asked me one day to go with him to a male brothel near Regent's Park Barraks. I consented out of curiosity. Moved by something stronger than curiosity, I made an assignation with a brawny young soldier for an afternoon to be passed in a private room at the same house.

Naturally, I chose a day on which I was not wanted at the Royal Institution. We came together at the time appointed; the strapping young soldier with his frank eyes and pleasant smile, and I the victim of sophisticated passions. For the first time in my experience I shared a bed with one so different from myself, and ardently desired by me, so supremely beautiful in my eyes, so attractive to my senses.

He was a very nice fellow, as it turned out: comradely and natural, regarding the affair which had brought us together in that

¹⁰⁴p. 483-484.

¹⁰⁵p. 489

place from a business-like and reasonable point of view.

For him at all events it involved nothing unusual, and his simple attitude, the not displeasing vanity with which he viewed his own physical attractions, and the genial sympathy with which he met the passion they aroused, taught me something I had never before conceived about illicit sexual relations.

Instead of yielding to any brutal impulse, I thoroughly enjoyed the vicinity of that splendid naked piece of manhood, then I made him clothe himself, sat and smoked and talked with him, and felt, at the end of the whole transaction, that some at least of the deepest moral problems might be solved by fraternity.

He made no exorbitant demands upon my purse, and seemed to appreciate the way in which I had accepted him – adding an agreeable intimation of his own satisfaction at the delight I took in his delightfulness. And all this was expressed by him in a wholly manly way, although I could not help imagining what he might have undergone on previous occasions within the walls of that same chamber, and thinking how mean and base any comradeship must be, built upon such foundations.

We parted the best of friends, exchanging addresses; and while I was in London I met him several times again, in public places, without a thought of vice.

These experience exercised a powerful effect upon my life. I learned from – or I deluded myself into thinking I had learned – that the physical appetite of one male for another may be made the foundation of a solid friendship, when the man drawn by passion exhibits a proper respect for the man who draws.

I also seemed to perceive that, within the sphere of the male brothel, even in that lawless, Godless place, permanent human relations – affections, reciprocal toleration, decencies of conduct, asking and yielding, concession and abstention – find their natural sphere: perhaps more than in the sexual relations consecrated by middle-class matrimony. So at least the manly and comradesly attitude of the young soldier, who had sold his body to a stranger, and with whom I as a stranger fraternized, indicated.

Was this a delusion? To this hour I do not know, though I have extended the same experience, with similar result, a hundredfold, never seeming to outrage any purely natural sentiments, but only colliding with the sense of law and the instincts of convention. [...]

For the present it is enough to say that I came away from the male

brothel with a strong conviction that, although it was a far more decent place than I expected, this was not the proper ground in which to plant the seeds of irresistible emotion. It offered an initial difficulty – a false position – which had to be overcome – It raised disgust, and I felt it shaking the dust and degradation of the locality off my feet.

With just the same feeling of disgust, not more, not less, have I quitted female brothels. But there I never found the satisfaction which the soldier gave me. From him I learned that natural male beings in the world at large were capable of corresponding to my appreciation of them. A dangerous lesson, perhaps."¹⁰⁶

2.23 The shared renunciation of marital sex

In London John falls ill with bronchitis and the doctor advises him to go to Greece but he stops in Cannes. In the spring of 1877 he made a tour of Lombardy. He associates with people of low social level and feels comfortable with them:

"the lesson taught me by the soldier in London found its application here. And yet, so strong is custom, so imperious education, I never condescended to a single act which the most virtuous could call reprehensible. I consorted with what are supposed to be the dregs of human nature; but I demanded nothing from these man and woman but comradeship. What I discovered was that I could love and fraternize with the least and last and poorest, that I could call the meanest my friends, my brothers and sisters. But I had no gospel to preach to them. I only came to understand them and their integrity with myself."¹⁰⁷

He feels bad in Turin and decides to return immediately to Clifton, the day after his arrival he has a violent pulmonary haemorrhage, he is resigned to die, his wife lovingly cares for him, then his health improves a bit but the fear of death looms on John and pushes him to sort out his worldly affairs. The doctors advise him not to stay in England: John and Catherine with their two eldest daughters would go to Egypt, the two younger daughters would remain in Clifton with the nannies. Sir William Jenner recommends making a stop in the Alps and making a will before leaving, because a cold could be fatal.

¹⁰⁶p. 489-491.

¹⁰⁷p. 493.

John's younger sister was with her husband in Davos at that time, in the Engadine [in the canton of Grisons] and the place was renowned for doctors and services for the sick. On August 7, 1877, John arrives in Davos, the first impression is not positive, the doctors tell John that a cavity is forming in his lung and impose on him a life as if he was in a sanatorium. Only in September he's allowed to walk a bit and ride a carriage. The occasion of the illness leads John to completely and definitively interrupt sexual intercourse with his wife who feels relieved, since then John and Catherine will no longer sleep in the same bed:

"it ought here to mention that it had become an article in my creed of social duty that men and women convicted of hereditary disease, phthisis or insanity, ought to refrain from procreation. Acting upon this principle I separated from my wife with her approval. She made it readily; for the sexual side of the marriage had never been for her more than a trouble. She disliked child-birth, and had, I think, no constitutional difficulties to overcome. In truth our married life had long been ill-arranged upon the ordinary basis of cohabitation. We had taken precautions against pregnancy; and our intercourse in this respect was principally determined by the need I felt of sexual outlet. This outlet was now definitely closed; and with reviving energy, the need became imperious. I suffered period of painful and exhausting erethism, attended with profuse seminal losses. Still I stuck to my decision, mainly because I thought it my duty to do so, but also because I judged, and judged rightly, that this return of sexual appetite was the sign of returning vigour. Even now I do not repent of the line we took. It placed me upon a sound and true relation to my wife – that of pure and faithful friendship, which from the commencement had been the real basis of our union. It delivered us both from sordid cares and preoccupations, and left her, on the verge of middle life, in full possession of her physical faculties. Still it had serious drawbacks for a man of my temperament. I began to feel morally irresponsible toward the woman who had willingly sanctioned the solution of the sexual bond between us. This state of things has lasted now for twelve years, during which we have rarely shared the same bedroom, and never the same bed."¹⁰⁸

At the end of autumn '77, a young man stopped not far from John out of a natural need. John followed him with his eyes until he turned behind the

¹⁰⁸p.496-497.

barn, if he could he would have followed him and would have gladly spent an afternoon with him on the cut hay.

In the winter of 77-78 John devotes himself to his studies and gradually his health improves.

John meets another guy who will become friends with him.

2.24 Christian Buol

"A young man called Christian Buol, used occasionally to drive me out in sledges on the snow"¹⁰⁹

The Buol family was a noble family and among its ancestors had several counts and barons of the Empire, the coat of arms of that family is found in several churches and castles in the valleys that descend towards the Rhino. Christian's elder brother was the doctor of Thusis, another was the owner of a hotel, a third was studying medicine, two were in America, in all the mother had given birth to 16 children. Christian had turned 19 and was

"one of the finest specimens of robust, handsome, intelligent and gentle adolescence I have met with. Possessed of enormous muscular strength, he had the quiet tempered manners, and the subdued speech, of a well-trained gentleman. I soon began to love him: shyly at first, stuck with the wonder of discovering anyone so new to my experience, so dignified, so courteous, so comradely, realizing at one and the same time for me all that I had dreamed of the democratic ideal and all that I desired in radiant manhood. When he came towards me, standing erect upon an empty wood-sledge, and driving four stout horses at a brisk trot down a snow slope, I seemed to see an ancient Greek of the Homeric age, perfect in 'moderation'¹¹⁰ and sober unassuming power. 'That is a man', I felt within myself. And I also felt obscurely that my ruling passion had reached a new and better stage, devoid of sentimentality, devoid of sordid appetite, free from the sense of sin. It was indeed impossible to think of Christian Buol and of sin in the same moment. Of this twelve years of intimate friendship with him have amply assured me."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹p. 498.

¹¹⁰in Greek

¹¹¹p. 498-499.

John falls in love with him, the friendship between them will go on for many years. Between Christmas and New Year John gives him a foam pipe, Christian is surprised.

"He took it with kindness, showing, I thought, just a touch of surprise. Nothing more passed [...] I was left with the uncomfortable doubt, which is one of the pleasant pangs of incipient affection, whether I had not committed a *gaucherie*."¹¹²

The intimacy between the two increases, they talk a lot, John invites Christian to dinner in his private room at the Belvedere and Christian invites him to his birthday party on March 22. John is fascinated by the dignity of the family and feels like a welcome and honoured guest.

John learns from village gossip that a brother of Christian's is about to lose his hotel due to debts incurred due to inexperience, he reports it to Christian, who is already aware of the fact, then offers 1000 pounds to the Buols to save the hotel, in practice it was the sum that was to be used for the trip to Egypt, now set aside. He will then give the Buols another 2,000 pounds. Loan that will be promptly repaid.

"And here I must add that my wife, acquainted at every point with the details of the transaction, and not ignorant of my affection for Christian, gave her unhesitating assent to my plan for their salvation. Generous and noble wife, born of a noble stock, gifted with the noblest natural sentiments!"¹¹³

Familiarity with the Buols and Christian grew to the point that John considered inviting Christian to accompany him on a trip to Italy.

"Before we started, I mentioned to a good counsellor of mine in Davos that I meant to take Christian Buol as my travelling servant on the journey. Actuated by what motives I know not, this person told me that I would be extremely unwise to do so. Christian, said my counsellor, had been twice fined for brawls upon the open street in Davos. He was a young man of Herculaean build (which I knew well) and might prove very dangerous if he should get into a quarrel in one of the Italian cities. This made me reflect. I was going with my wife and three daughters and my cousin Isabella Gamble – a party of five ladies and their maid. I was a feeble invalid, slowly gaining ground after what threatened

¹¹²p. 499.

¹¹³p.500.

to be a mortal blow. Nevertheless, although I did not doubt the truth of the information given, I determined to take Christian."¹¹⁴

The fears proved completely unfounded.

"We made a most delightful journey together; and in the course of it he showed that he was ready, out of sympathy and liking for me, to concede many innocent delight of privacy, which cost him nothing and which filled me with ineffable satisfaction. In his company I seemed to realize what my nature had been blindly seeking for through many tedious years - a loyal comradeship to which my friend's physical beauty added for me the charm of sensuous romance. We often slept together in the same bed; and he was not shy of allowing me to view, as men may view the idols of their gods, the naked splendour of his perfect body. But neither in act nor deed, far less in words, did the least shadow of lust cloud the serenity of that masculine community. He gave what honour and affection prompted him to concede. I took what passion and my reverence for the generous youth allowed me to enjoy. I did not want more indeed than the blameless proximity of his pure person. Odd and unnatural as this may seem to those who cannot understand the man's love for a man, or to those who have made their minds up that such love must be brutal, I declare that this is the fact. Anyone who has enjoyed the privilege of Christian's acquaintance will know that he could not have yielded a base pleasure to me, and that I could not have dared to demand it. If the soldier whom I met in London brothel taught me the rudiments of comradeship, Christian made me perceive its higher more delightful issues. I have never enjoyed a more sense-shooting and more elevated pleasure than I had with him - sex being nowhere - drowned and absorbed in love, which was itself so spiritually sensual that the needs of the body disappeared and were forgotten. Words fail me when I try to describe a relation which had much of hazardous, but which the respective natures of the men concerned made natural and right. A spy might have looked through cracks in doors upon us; and the spy would have seen nothing reprehensible. So we continued to respect each other; and when he told me that his heart was set upon a girl, whom he had learned to love in the school at Thuisis, and whom he subsequently married, our relations remained

¹¹⁴p. 501.

unaltered. He accepted me for what I was; and I asked nothing except his proximity. It was enough for me to be with him."¹¹⁵

John's admiration for the Grisons and for their frank and democratic customs, without class distinction, was such that the Symonds family ended up settling in Davos. Christian often accompanied John to Italy and when he was busy on the farm his nephew, also named Christian and his age, took his place.

John made friends not without a passionate interest even with several Italian guys and treated them as he had done with the two Christians.

2.25 Angelo

In the spring of 1981, John was in Venice. One afternoon, in a shop, his friend Horatio Brown points out two gondoliers, one of them immediately hits John. He is called Angelo Fusato and is 24 years old. To Angelo John dedicates many sonnets with a strong erotic content. John only knows where General de Horsey lived for whom Angelo and the other gondolier work. He spends two troubled nights dreaming of that guy and desiring him. Finally in the morning, he goes to look for him, gives him an appointment for the evening at nine in the Jesuit church. Angelo comes, people called him the madman, he was poor and spendthrift. John reports that it was not uncommon for the gondoliers of Venice to grant themselves for money but with certain limits beyond which any request would be rejected. John took Angelo with him to the Alberti house, where he was staying. A sonnet contains the exact description of what happened.

"I am not dreaming. He was surely here,
 And sat beside me on this hard low bed;
 For we had wine before us, and I said –
 'Take gold: 'twill furnish forth some better cheer.'
 He was all clothed in white; a gondolier;
 White trousers. White straw hat upon his head,
 A cream-white shirt loose-buttoned, a silk thread
 Slung with a charm about his throat so clear.
 Yes, he was here. Our for hands, laughing, made
 Brief havoc of his belt, shirt, trousers, shoes:
 Till, mother-naked, white as lilies, laid
 There on the counterpane, he bade me use

¹¹⁵p. 502.

Even as I willed his body. But love forbade –
 Love cried, 'Less than Love's best thou shalt refuse!' "¹¹⁶

John is so shocked by the meeting with Angelo that he leaves Venice the following day and for the whole summer he does nothing but think of Angelo and write poems about him without interruption.

In autumn John returns to Venice, meets Angelo several times at night in his rooms.

"In the autumn I returned alone to Venice having resolved to establish this now firmly rooted passion upon some solid basis. I lived in the Casa Barbier. Angelo was still in the service of General de Horsey. But we often met at night in my rooms; and I gradually strove to persuade him that I was no mere light-o'-love, but a man on whom he could rely – whose honour, though rooted in dishonour, might be trusted. I gave him a gondola and a good deal of money.

He seemed to be greedy, and I was mortified by noticing that he spent his cash in what I thought a foolish way – on dress and trinkets and so forth.

He told me something about his history: how he had served three years in the Genio at Venice, Ferrara and Verona. Released from the army, he came home to find his mother dead in the madhouse at San Clemente, his elder brother Carlo dead in sorrow and fever after three weeks' illness, his father prostrated with grief and ruined, and his only remaining brother Vittorio doing the work of a baker's boy. The more I got to know the man, the more I liked him.

Yet there were almost insurmountable obstacles to be overcome. These arose mainly from the false position in which we found ourselves from the beginning. He not unnaturally classed me with those other men to whose caprices he had sold his beauty.

He could not comprehend that I meant to be his friend, to serve and help him in all reasonable ways according to my power. Seeing me come and go in short flights, he felt convinced that one day or other my will would change and I should abandon him.

A just instinct led him to calculate that our friendship, originating in my illicit appetite and his compliance, could not be expected to develop a sound and vigorous growth. The time must come, he reasoned, when this sickly plant would die and be forgotten.

¹¹⁶p. 516

And then there was always between us the liaison of shame; for it is not to be supposed that I confined myself to sitting opposite the man and gazing into his fierce eyes of fiery opal.

At the back of his mind the predominant thought, I fancy, was to this effect: 'Had I not better get what I can out of the strange Englishman, who talks so much about his intentions and his friendship, but whose actual grasp upon my life is so uncertain?' I really do not think that he was wrong. But it made my task very difficult.

I discovered that he was living with a girl by whom he had two boys, They were too poor to marry. I told him that it was his duty to make her an honest woman, not being at that time fully aware how frequent and how binding such connections are in Venice.

However, the pecuniary assistance I gave him enabled the couple to set up house; and little by little I had the satisfaction of perceiving that he was not only gaining confidence in me but also beginning to love me as an honest well-wisher.

I need not describe in detail the several stage by which this liaison between myself and Angelo assumed its present form. At last he entered my service as gondolier at fixed wages, with a certain allowance of food and fuel. He took many journeys with me, and visited me at Davos. We grew to understand each other and to conceal nothing.

Everything I learned about him made me forget the suspicion which had clouded the beginning of our acquaintance and closed my eyes to the anomaly of the comradeship which retained so much of passion upon my part and of indulgence on his. I found him manly in the truest sense, with the manliness of a soldier and the warm soft heart on an exceptionally kindly nature – proud and sensitive wayward as a child, ungrudging in his service, willing and good-tempered, though somewhat indolent at the same time and subject to explosions of passion. He is truthful and sincere, frank in telling me what he thinks wrong, perfect in his manners and behaviour – due allowance made for his madcap temperament, hoarse voice and wild impulsive freedom."¹¹⁷

The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds conclude with the story of Angelo.

John died in Rome on April 19, 1893, at the age of 52. I strongly recommend reading his Memoirs to anyone interested in seriously understanding

¹¹⁷p. 517-518

what homosexuality is.