

A dirty book

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reader found *The Deer Park* a deeply moving book, because in the last analysis the humanity of the heterosexual and the homosexual is the same. But if heterosexual and homosexual are more alike than different in the essentials of their humanity, it is important to say that they are also alike in their inhumanities. Many of us tend to idealize heterosexual life, because we do not know it as intimately and realistically as we know our own way of life. At the same time we are often tempted to believe that homosexuals are especially faithless, heartless, cowardly, hedonistic, unstable, vain, exploitative. Now, among the heterosexuals of *The Deer Park* we find exposed all the tragic and distressing defects of character with which we become familiar in the world of «queens». It is cold comfort. But this observation suggests that decency has little to do with whom you love, man or woman, but with how you love. In the immortal words of that old blues-shouter, Miss Edith Wilson, «A good man . . . is mighty hard to find.» Yet, God help us, we try . . .
Luther Allen.

A dirty book

by John Bowen

Late last year Peter Wildeblood's book *Against the Law* was published by Messrs Weidenfeld and Nicholson; it was reviewed in «Truth» by Ludovic Kennedy. Mr. Wildeblood, one of the defendants in the «Montagu Case», had been sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment for a homosexual offence, and his book is an account of the events leading up to the trial, and of his experiences in prison. In it he propounds three theses; that homosexual acts committed in private between consenting adults ought not to be considered criminal, that in any case prison is an environment that encourages homosexuality and not cures it, and that, in Wormwood Scrubbs in particular, living conditions are so squalid that, whatever the deterrent effect of prison may be to most criminals, its rehabilitating effects do not exist, and that in this respect English prisons compare unfavourably with the prisons of the USA, the USSR and many continental countries.

Against the Law is written seriously and without self-pity. It has been favourably reviewed in *Truth*, *The Spectator*, the *New Statesman and Nation*, *The Observer* (in which Eward Crankshaw has listed it as one of his «books of the year»), the *Manchester Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph* and *The Listener*. The *News Chronicle* carried a leader on it; the *Daily Express* and *Empire News* quoted from it in their news columns. It has appeared at a time when the Church Council, the BMA and a Royal Commission (before which Wildeblood himself has given evidence) have all been concerned with the position of the homosexual in our society, but all its topicality and its serious sponsorship have been unable to keep it from being considered, in certain quarters of respectable

opinion, as a «dirty book» to be sold under the counter and kept from the shelves of libraries.

An indication of this is the fact that so far *Against the Law* has had a much higher sale proportionately in London than in the provinces; the publishers sent out a particularly large number of review copies to provincial papers, but so far no provincial paper appears to have reviewed it. Travellers reported an apparent hostility to the book on the part of some booksellers — «I suppose I've got to take a copy,» one is reported to have remarked to a traveller — and pre-publication sales were lower than might have been expected for a work of this topicality and quality, while re-orders have often been small and frequent as if in response only to customers' individual demands. A number of correspondents have written to Wideblood asking why the book is not in the shops; in Cardiff, a friend of mine canvassed four bookshops for it without success. In Richmond, the Libraries Committees split, four-four, over a proposal to buy the book; when the Chairman gave his casting vote to buy, Alderman Courlander walked out of the meeting in protest, saying he resigned from the committee — in any case the committee agreed unanimously with the suggestion of Councillor Mrs Boursot that the book should be kept at the library's counter and be available only on request.

Typical of this attitude is my own experience at the Times Book Shop, where the book was not, when I called, on display. I asked whether it was sold out, and was told by the Assistant Manager. «No, but we just keep it for people who ask for it». I produced my journalist's card and was at once referred to the Manager, a harassed, middle-aged gentleman, who refused to comment on his Assistant's statement. «I don't think you ought to quote that,» the Manager said, «I can't talk about it, and I've got my own work to do — it's Christmas.»

In any society at any time, there are always those who will resent any criticism whatever of the way things are. It is, after all, the official attitude. The Home Office, when approached by the *Acton Gazette and Post* and asked to comment on Wildeblood's picture of Wormwood Scrubs, replied, «We do not comment on prisoners' allegations». Among those who have actually read *Against the Law* the response has been different. Since its publication, just over a month ago, Wildeblood has been getting an average of 25 letters and 10 telephone calls a day, none of them abusive, and very few anonymous. Some, naturally enough, have been from homosexuals, thanking him for putting their point of view (one man wrote indignantly, «What does Lord Hailsham mean by 'promiscuous'; my friend and I have been together for 35 years»; another was from a young man who had been persuaded by the police to turn State's evidence). These were to be expected, but they have not been the majority. Clergymen from East End parishes have written for advice in the problems of resettling released convicts, doctors, barristers and two judges have written sympathetic letters of agreement; there have been letters from publishers and other writers, and many from parents seeking guidance in understanding and helping homosexual sons. Wildeblood has been answering all these individually, and is guardedly cour-

teous and friendly in reply to the telephone calls which begin, «Is that Mr Wildeblood? You won't know me, but»

The «official» attitude, then, is not any longer the majority attitude. A writer in the American *New Republic* has commented that, after the Wilde trial, Oscar Wilde was spattered with blobs of spittle from the people who watched him driven to prison, but, after the Montagu Trial, it was the informers, Reynolds and McNally, who had to be protected by the police from the crowd of spectators. Wildeblood, who went to prison, has kept the affection and respect of his neighbours and acquaintances.

From: «Truth», London.

Homosexuals and Society

Sir, — From the press reports of the B.M.A. memorandum on homosexuality one would suppose that it was only those men who are unlucky enough, or unwise enough, to fall into the hands of the police upon whom the present state of the law bears hardly. It is remarked that there are practising homosexuals in parliament and other high places as though this were surprising. There is a commonly accepted fallacy that all homosexuals are effeminate and obvious, and that they are especially attracted to certain professions. Both these opinions are contrary to what little evidence is available. It is probable, if not certain, that homosexuality is fairly evenly distributed throughout all levels of society, and has been so in all ages. Its greater or lesser apparent prevalence at different levels and at different times is due solely to the degree of tolerance obtaining, more or less, in those times and places. Thus in certain fields such as e. g., the theatre, where tolerance is greater, it is less necessary for a man to wear a mask. It is true, of course, that some whose effeminacy places them beyond concealment are attracted to work in spheres where concealment is less necessary. An actor, dress designer, writer, or musician is not likely to be ostracised by his colleagues because he is known to be «queer.» Could the same be said of bank managers, civil servants, clergymen or schoolmasters, for example? The fact is that there are thousands of men who look no different from anyone else, who dress quietly, live sober lives, perform their social duties and try to give offence to no one. It is upon these that the law presses so heavily. These are the potential victims of blackmail and assault. Dr. Claxton suggests that religious conversion is the answer to this problem. I maintain that this is a quite unrealistic view. There are few individuals of sufficient quality to be able to direct their total sexual energies into «good works». Most people need to live a life which includes the companionship and understanding of another person, and a fairly regular sexual life. The so-called normal man obtains these benefits through marriage. Does Dr. Claxton suppose that all homosexuals are so much better than the normal that they can pursue the way of sanctity, or so much worse that they must be treated as felons?