

"All that other stuff"

Autor(en): **Griffin, Howard**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle**

Band (Jahr): **28 (1960)**

Heft 9

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-570747>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Inhalten der Zeitschriften. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern.

Die auf der Plattform e-periodica veröffentlichten Dokumente stehen für nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke in Lehre und Forschung sowie für die private Nutzung frei zur Verfügung. Einzelne Dateien oder Ausdrucke aus diesem Angebot können zusammen mit diesen Nutzungsbedingungen und den korrekten Herkunftsbezeichnungen weitergegeben werden.

Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. Die systematische Speicherung von Teilen des elektronischen Angebots auf anderen Servern bedarf ebenfalls des schriftlichen Einverständnisses der Rechteinhaber.

Haftungsausschluss

Alle Angaben erfolgen ohne Gewähr für Vollständigkeit oder Richtigkeit. Es wird keine Haftung übernommen für Schäden durch die Verwendung von Informationen aus diesem Online-Angebot oder durch das Fehlen von Informationen. Dies gilt auch für Inhalte Dritter, die über dieses Angebot zugänglich sind.

He was an entirely different character from the electric eel I'd held in my arms the night before—relaxed, smiling, boyish and very shy. He allowed me to carry him and dump him in a hot bath, where my pleasure in soaping and sluicing down his gorgeous muscular young body was about equalled by his puzzled delight in the mysteries of the guest-house's European style plumbing. In the course of our halting exchanges of talk and signs, I gathered he was asking first to be allowed to come flying with us, and then to follow me and be my servant for the rest of my life. Of course I could hardly requite the rajah's hospitality just like that, nor was I prepared to supplant Hussain. Indeed I already knew deep down both that I should never see the boy again, and that it would actually be better so. Life is hard and I was already old enough to know that no second or subsequent repetition of a pleasure which stemmed so directly from plain ordinary physical desire could ever touch the first. By now I think he too will know the same; though that morning, without the benefit of a common language, it was beyond me to explain such a feeling to him, and there were tears warm on his cheek as I gave him a long, slow farewell kiss, and pressed his firm boyish contours to me in a last anguished embrace. After which, without another word he slung one leg over the balcony and dropped down like a cat into the street below, silently as he had come. I did indeed never see or hear of him again.

I wonder if I shall ever again make such good use of a cigarette lighter.

„All That Other Stuff“

by Howard Griffin

Two novels have recently been published in London which tackle as their subject the nature of homosexuality in the armed forces. One of these, *The Feathers of Death*, by Simon Raven, concerns a young officer in a snob cavalry regiment who, after having an affair with an eighteen-year trumpeter, shoots and kills the youth for disobeying orders during a campaign in an Empire outpost. The officer is courtmartialled for murder.

But the other, *At Fever Pitch* by David Caute, is a much more complex and intriguing book. Written by a man still in his early twenties, it is a curiously kaleidoscopic example of the *roman à thèse*. The author was born in Egypt, educated at Edinburgh University and his family live in London. His book appears to be the result of his service in the Gold Coast Regiment during 1956.

Very early in the novel we are introduced to Michael Glyn, a subaltern in the British forces stationed at Bada, which is the capital of an African country on the edge of self-government. He is an unathletic young man, nervously alive, self-conflictive, with a rather Jewish face and sallow skin. During long trains of inner argument, as Michael lies on his cot in the intense heat under the mosquito net, the reader is given portions and parcels of his rather chaotic past. We learn that, when called before a headmaster at school, he'd been warned that if he «persisted with the older boys, it might never stop and he might not marry and have bleeding brats.» Through the rather clumsy use of stream of consciousness, we are admitted into the protagonist's attitude, an oddly ambivalent one, fervent and saturated with guilt. He is half in revolt against what he thinks of as «government of the normal for the normal», though he does not define his idea of the norm. Deeply involved in his own emotions, reacting with his

whole body to people, the young subaltern, like an unruly colt, kicks against the essential homosexuality of his nature, which he thinks of as a social stigma.

In the early part of the book he is portrayed as a lonely sensitive man, mettlesome, very much the child of his mother, hostile to his father. Although distant and sardonic in his relations with his fellow officers. Glyn maintains a quite different kind of relation with his native servant, Sulley, himself a gentle, rather innocent, instinctive creature. Until recently Sulley has been a bushman; he has a native wife in a distant part of the country whom he appears to want to see. His relationship to Glyn is slavish; he polishes his boots, puts out his clothes, makes up his cot. Contradictively, we are led to believe that on the deep level of feeling Sulley is a more profound and solid person than his master. Hating violence, Glyn is uneasy, in more or less open revolt against the corruption and funk he finds around him in the British forces as well as in the new regime led by unscrupulous half-educated native leaders. A nightmarish picture is painted of the frenzy in this Ghana-like colony.

Against the confused conditions of backward African life, the pathetic already doomed relationship between Glyn and his servant develops. It culminates on a torrid night when, through a complex of persuasion, bullying and a struggle for pity, Glyn induces Sulley to sleep in his bed. Glyn felt «wonderfully drowsy and relaxed and was only dimly, yet ecstatically aware that he was sinking . . .» Glyn's edginess is soothed by the naturalness of the dark savage but, afterward, his remorse, selfdoubt and even horror re-assert themselves. «You can't have an African in your bed.» It isn't done. No matter how he tries to rationalize it, it has been done and it becomes the pivot of the entire novel. Glyn tries to tell himself that «Sulley is separate . . . he doesn't control or regulate my entire outlook.» The reaction away from what is called «bed-palaver» between the two is presented in a series of scenes. The reader's sympathy goes out to the native who is sensuous and devoted. Glyn, however, becomes progressively less admirable. When Sulley's wife returns from the North Country, the subaltern quizzes his servant about their relationship. Sadistically he pushes and tricks Sulley into blurting out, at last, that he thought «the other thing» i.e. Homosexuality «be better.» Glyn experiences only revulsion and nausea when compelled—through his own perverseness—to confront again that he had slept with his batman.

His perversity is brought home to us by a number of touches. On one occasion he thinks «to be a woman would be perfect, if only one had first known what it is to be a man.» At the age of thirteen he had played the part of Kate in *Henry V*.

Meanwhile, the subaltern is promoted to ADC to Brigadier Ridley-Smith, a promotion that complicates rather than simplifies his self-awareness. And now with the Brigadier a sinister cat-and-mouse-game develops, at a tangent to his love-hate feelings about Sulley.

Enough has been said to indicate that this is a swarming book. Unfortunately, the style is turgid and repetitive. Mr Cate tries to combine too many dissonantly colored threads in his tapestry. The political and the personal are presented alongside one another, and the reader is shown how events in the one world spark off events in the other. Great determination and patience are required to plow through the general inflation of lively detail.

It is not our purpose to summarise the ambitious melodramatic plot. The reader becomes clogged and resentful at the over-inclusiveness of the book. With the sweeping ardor of youth, Mr. Cate has attacked an enormously difficult sub-

ject and given us a great array of characters: the alert self-questioning Glyn, killing his real nature; the mean ruthless Brigadier, hypocritical, reaching out ineptly toward his ADC; the blundering inarticulate Sulley who dies through the aggressive egotism of the Brigadier. This is only to name a few who appear in the course of the crowded book.

I shall not reveal the nature of the explosion at the end, but, turning the last page, a number of thoughts were touched off in my mind. Unreservedly I admired Mr. Cauter's immediacy and his cutting-to-the-bone. There had been another novel, *The Invisible Glass* by Loren Wahl, which had also dealt with black and white relationships in the army. But this time it had been the American army.

This novel, also melodramatic, took place in a remote Italian village during the American occupation. Two men—one a young white lieutenant, the other a negro jeep-driver—are attracted to each other. However, the lieutenant, whose buddy has been killed at Salerno, feels the pull more strongly and consciously than the inexperienced slow-thinking jeep-driver. The negro whose name is Chick is educated and has picked up—understandably—feelings of persecution along the line. The first Sgt. and Commanding Officer are on his tail. In reaction against this pressure, Chick turns searchingly toward the lieutenant, although he's not sure what he's in search of. A number of circumstances occur to crystallize all these dormant feelings. After considerable drinking, one night, they are forced to share the same bed in an Italian house. Although passive (one is led to believe), Chick allows the sexuality in the situation to develop. After this experience, it is the negro in this book who becomes resentful and superior, if not evil. From this let he who will jump to conclusions about the difference between white-black contacts in the American and the British scheme of things!

A comparison can be drawn between these two novels which present triggered inter-racial situations. To start the story, the reader is given the details of formless wrought-up relationships and then, as if it were the reagent in a chemical experiment (which, in fact, it often is) the element of sexuality is introduced. The sexuality accelerates whatever compounding is taking place. As a precipitate of this action, we are left with in *At Fever Pitch* the scorn of the white for the bushman but—more ironically—in *The Invisible Glass* the scorn of the negro for the white.

In the case of the latter book, where the characters are mostly American, we have an American ambiance transposed to Italy. Chick (the negro) feels that he knows the lieutenant's secret (his homosexuality), and this in itself causes him to lose respect and to believe he has power over him. Chick played the passive role in the sexual relationship; this, too, seems to give him an advantage. He thinks he has the key to the lieutenant's vulnerability, if not his destruction. He becomes insolent and hostile. (But in *At Fever Pitch* it is the white subaltern who, after the sexual experience, becomes sullen and hostile. It is finally remarked of him that «he had an almost psychopathic hatred for Africans.») Chick detaches himself from any sense of his own homosexuality. The negro tells the lieutenant he «doesn't go for that stuff» and that he let himself be made because he was drunk. «I thought you were on the level with me,» Chick adds sullenly.

«Believe me, I am,» the lieutenant claims. The negro: «But not the way I mean. I thought you were being square with me for my own sake. Not because of that other stuff.»

It is apparent that Chick is trying to shut off, to compartmentalize his sexual nature from the rest of him in a way similar to the behavior of Michael Glyn in *At Fever Pitch*. For different reasons, they are unable to incorporate the sexual element—forever breaking out in unorthodox areas—into the harmony of their lives. They have not learned that the difficult ordinary divine stuff of life cannot be absolutely separated—except at the keenest risk—from «that other stuff.»

In dealing with inarticulate people of this sort, the homosexual is often caught in a curious dilemma: that of overemphasizing or disacknowledging his homosexuality, in either case resulting in dishonesty. In the early part of an acquaintanceship, the homosexual can sometimes sense an Either/Or. The other person (who may or may not be a piece of trade) seems to be tacitly presenting him with the choice of (a) being his friend or (b) being made by him. If he is reflective, this type of homosexual begins to realize that he is often attracted to men set apart from him by a class, color or educational barrier, called in this novel «the invisible glass», a screen which allows each to look across, to be keenly aware of the other, yet inhibiting, even preventing—except to the most determined or impulsive—real contact. For those who take this daring step, there are many pitfalls, not least of which is self-deception and sentimentality, a danger even so great a man as Whitman did not wholly escape. The man who reaches across in this way may think of himself, may even proclaim himself a great democrat. Yet the question must be asked—and answered with honesty: To how great a degree is this «selfless democracy» due to sexual interest?

Perhaps one may think that the answer to this question does not matter and that what may start out as a sexual interest may, after some years and a certain difficulty, be expanded into a humane vision and vital philanthropy. Of course this, too, does happen. However, it is important, I think, to be clear to oneself about how great a role the sexual plays in this type of situation. It is important for both parties. When we act with vague pretention toward others as a sympathetic democrat concealing all the while a narrow sexual interest, we are distorting the whole relationship. Whether the other party suspects or not, the situation will eventually prove harmful—more particularly, perhaps, if he does not.

In Whitman, as already mentioned, one finds this element of «unavowedness» of which he himself was conscious. One is reminded of rich women active in welfare-work for negroes; the lever of their actions is that they like sex with negroes. When we examine the notations of Whitman, we see that he struggled against what he called his «adhesiveness» and tried to banish it from his life. He probably meant by this purposely vague word promiscuity (in a sexual sense) as well as the tendency to attach oneself to a multitude of people whom he desired. He doubtless felt that multiple desire of this sort was in some way ignoble. For what really did he desire? To devour them, only to spew them forth? Perhaps he suspected, to his shame, that beneath an apparent breadth of approach lay secret narrowness, ulterior purposes, preoccupation with sexuality.

We see that in *At Fever Pitch* Michael Glyn, when sexually attracted, tends to treat the negro servant almost as an equal. But after he has gone to bed with him and satisfied his sexual curiosity he reacts by losing interest in him. And the egalitarianism disappears (but makes a remorseful reappearance much later, after the servant's death). Though Glyn is an arrogant person who likes to dominate,

deep within himself he is aware of secret shrinking and funk. He remains even more dangerously dishonest at the end of the story than at the beginning.

The point is that the homosexual should attempt to clarify to himself (in a way that Michael Glyn, Chick and even the lieutenant do not) what in a particular emotional situation with a particular man is operative. The psychology of black-white relationships varies enormously from country to country. In America operative motives differ from operative motives in a British colony (a matter for sociologic investigation).

Of course one operative motive is the white person's belief in the myth of the sexually superior prowess of the black. There is a widespread stereotype of the negro as the person who is more passionate in bed. A negro can immediately sense when he is approached by someone who consciously or unconsciously entertains this belief and his reaction is often secret contempt and a desire for revenge. In retaliation the negro will often use his sexuality as a weapon against the white, making the latter sex-enslaved and exploiting him emotionally in return for his having been exploited socially and economically by the white.

Take the case of Michael Glyn. He is a person who does not like to be touched. In the early part of the book he tries to go to bed with a beautiful halfcaste girl to whom he is attracted, but is numb and cannot consummate the relationship. Glyn has great difficulty with his own reservoirs of feeling. What he hopes to gain, by contagious magic, from sex with the bushman is something of his naturalness and directness of feeling. As the man who eats the lion's heart hopes to acquire courage, Michael Glyn hopes some of his servant's simplicity will rub off on him. There is between Glyn and Sulley the magnetic polarity that often exists between the intellectual and the animal.

Within himself Glyn harbors, at one and the same time, desire for and reaction from directness of feeling. Unconsciously such people often set as a goal for themselves complete escape from feeling. Why does a person like Glyn choose a negro rather than, say, a white fellow-officer to go to bed with? First of all, because by this act he can neurotically «solve» his entire problem. If he choose someone whom he believes of an inferior status, he can in this situation *feel* scorn for his partner. To feel even such a negative emotion is regarded as better than not feeling at all.

The magic, therefore, creates a circuit. It is not only the white who magically expects to gain by this «physical contagion». The black ritualistically believes he will gain the illumination and intellectuality of the white.

Personally I am always alone but never lonely

SUBSCRIVER 3246