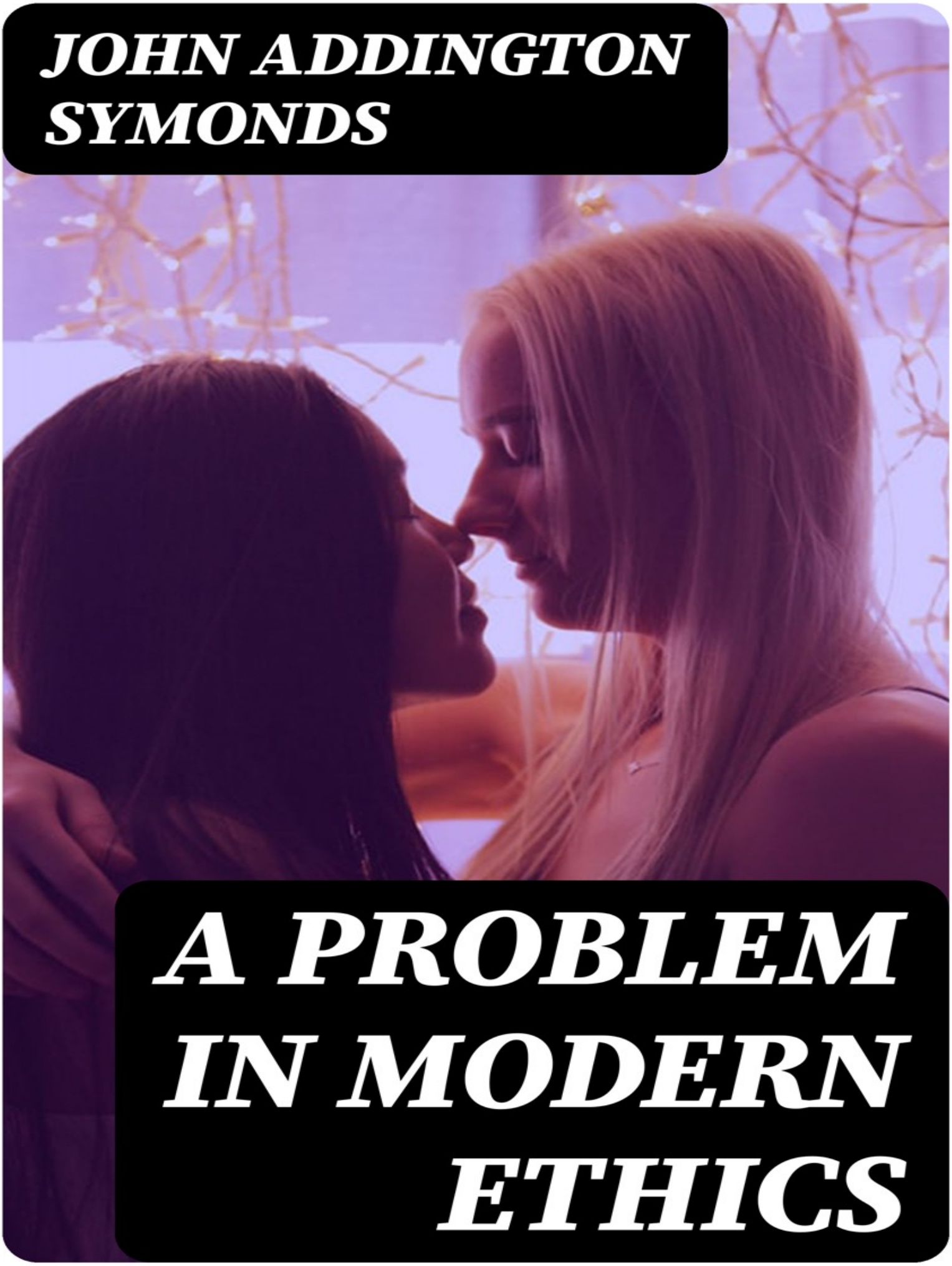
JOHN ADDINGTON SYMONDS



A PROBLEM IN MODERN ETHICS

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Being an Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion, Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.
I.
II.
III.
IV.
V.
VI.
VII.
VIII.
IX.
X.

INTRODUCTION.

Table of Contents

THERE is a passion, or a perversion of appetite, which, like all human passions, has played a considerable part in the world's history for good or evil; but which has hardly yet received the philosophical attention and the scientific investigation it deserves. The reason of this may be that in all Christian societies the passion under consideration has been condemned to pariahdom; consequently, philosophy and science have not deigned to make it the subject of special enquiry. Only one great race in past ages, the Greek race, to whom we owe the inheritance of our ideas, succeeded in raising it to the level of chivalrous enthusiasm. Nevertheless, we find it present everywhere and in all periods of history. We cannot take up the religious books, the legal codes, the annals, the descriptions of the manners of any nation, whether large or small, powerful or feeble, civilised or savage, without meeting with this passion in one form or other. Sometimes it assumes the calm and dignified attitude of conscious merit, as in Sparta, Athens, Thebes. Sometimes it skulks in holes and corners, hiding an abashed head and shrinking from the light of day, as in the capitals of modern Europe. It confronts us on the steppes of Asia, where hordes of nomads drink the milk of mares; in the bivouac of Keltish warriors, lying wrapped in wolves' skins round their camp-fires; upon the sands of Arabia, where the Bedaween raise desert dust in flying squadrons. We discern it among the palm-groves of the South Sea Islands, in the card-houses and temple-gardens of Japan, under Esquimaux

snow-huts, beneath the sultry vegetation of Peru, beside the streams of Shiraz and the waters of the Ganges, in the cold clear air of Scandinavian winters. It throbs in our huge cities. The pulse of it can be felt in London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, no less than in Constantinople, Naples, Teheran, and Moscow. It finds a home in Alpine valleys, Albanian ravines, Californian canyons, and gorges of Caucasian mountains. It once sat, clothed in Imperial purple, on the throne of the Roman Caesars, crowned with the tiara on the chair of St. Peter. It has flaunted, emblazoned with the heraldries of France and England, in coronation ceremonies at Rheims and Westminster. The royal palaces of Madrid and Aranjuez tell their tales of it. So do the ruined courtyards of Granada and the castle-keep of Avignon. It shone with clear radiance in the gymnasium of Hellas, and nerved the dying heroes of Greek freedom for their last forlorn hope upon the plains of Chæronea. Endowed with inextinguishable life, in spite of all that has been done to suppress it, this passion survives at large in modern states and towns, penetrates society, makes itself felt in every quarter of the globe where men are brought into communion with men.

Yet no one dares to speak of it; or if they do, they bate their breath, and preface their remarks with maledictions.

Those who read these lines will hardly doubt what passion it is that I am hinting at. *Quod semper ubique et ab omnibus*—surely it deserves a name. Yet I can hardly find a name which will not seem to soil this paper. The accomplished languages of Europe in the nineteenth century supply no term for this persistent feature of human psychology, without importing some implication of disgust,

disgrace, vituperation. Science, however, has recently—within the last twenty years in fact—invented a convenient phrase, which does not prejudice the matter under consideration. She speaks of the "inverted sexual instinct"; and with this neutral nomenclature the investigator has good reason to be satisfied.

Inverted sexuality, the sexual instinct diverted from its normal channel, directed (in the case of males) to males, forms the topic of the following discourse. The study will be confined to modern times, and to those nations which regard the phenomenon with religious detestation. This renders the enquiry peculiarly difficult, and exposes the enquirer, unless he be a professed expert in diseases of the mind and nervous centres, to almost certain misconstruction. Still, there is no valid reason why the task of statement and analysis should not be undertaken. Indeed, one might rather wonder why candid and curious observers of humanity have not attempted to fathom a problem which faces them at every turn in their historical researches and in daily life. Doubtless their neglect is due to natural or acquired repugnance, to feelings of disgust and hatred, derived from immemorial tradition, and destructive of the sympathies which animate a really zealous pioneer. Nevertheless, what is human is alien to no human being. What the law punishes, but what, in spite of law, persists and energises, ought to arrest attention. We are all of us responsible to some extent for the maintenance and enforcement of our laws. We are all of us, as evolutionary science surely teaches, interested in the facts of anthropology, however repellant some of these may be to

our own feelings. We cannot evade the conditions of *atavism* and *heredity*. Every family runs the risk of producing a boy or a girl whose life will be embittered by inverted sexuality, but who in all other respects will be no worse or better than the normal members of the home. Surely, then, it is our duty and our interest to learn what we can about its nature, and to arrive through comprehension at some rational method of dealing with it.

I.

Table of Contents

CHRISTIAN OPINION.

SINCE this enquiry is limited to actual conditions of contemporary life, we need not discuss the various ways in which the phenomenon of sexual inversion has been practically treated by races with whose habits and religions we have no affinity.

On the other hand, it is of the highest importance to obtain a correct conception of the steps whereby the Christian nations, separating themselves from ancient paganism, introduced a new and stringent morality into their opinion on this topic, and enforced their ethical views by legal prohibitions of a very formidable kind.

Without prejudging or prejudicing this new morality, now almost universally regarded as a great advance upon the ethics of the earlier pagan world, we must observe that it arose when science was non-existent, when the study of humanity had not emerged from the cradle, and when theology was in the ascendant. We have therefore to expect

from it no delicate distinctions, no anthropological investigations, no psychological analysis, and no spirit of toleration. It simply decreed that what had hitherto been viewed as immorality at worst should henceforth be classed among crimes against God, nature, humanity, the state.

Opening the Bible, we find severe penalties attached to sexual inversion by the Mosaic law, in the interests of population and in harmony with the Jewish theory of abominations. The lesson is driven home by the legend of two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, overwhelmed with fire because of their addiction to abnormal sexual indulgences. Here the *vindices flammæ* of the Roman code appear for the first time—the stake and the flames, which mediæval legislation appointed for offenders of this sort.

St. Paul, penetrated with Hebrew ethics, denounced the corruption of the Gentiles in these words: "For this cause God gave them up into vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompence of their error which was meet."

Christ uttered no opinion upon what we now call sexual inversion. Neither light nor leading comes from Him, except such as may be indirectly derived from his treatment of the woman taken in adultery.

When the Empire adopted Christianity, it had therefore the traditions of the Mosaic law and the first chapter of the Epistle to the Romans to guide its legislators on this topic. The Emperors felt obscurely that the main pulses of human

energy were slackening; population all tended to dwindle; the territory of the empire shrank slowly year by year before their eyes. As the depositaries of a higher religion and a nobler morality, they felt it their duty to stamp out pagan customs, and to unfurl the banner of social purity. The corruption of the Roman cities had become abominable. The laziness and cowardice of Roman citizens threatened the commonwealth with ruin. To repress sexual appetites was not the ruler's object. It was only too apparent that these natural desires no longer prompted the people to sufficient procreation or fertility. The brood begotten upon Roman soil was inadequate to cope with the inrushing tide of barbarians. Wisdom lay in attempting to rehabilitate marriage, the family domestic life. Meanwhile a certain vice ran riot through society, a vice for which Jehovah had rained fire and brimstone upon Sodom, a vice which the Mosaic code punished with death, a vice threatened by St. Paul with "that recompence of their error which was meet."

Justinian, in 538 A.D., seems to have been terrified by famines, earthquakes and pestilences. He saw, or professed to see, in these visitations the avenging hand of Jehovah, the "recompence which was meet" mysteriously prophesied by St. Paul. Thereupon he fulminated his edict against unnatural sinners, whereby they were condemned to torments and the supreme penalty of death. The preamble to his famous Novella 77 sets forth the principles on which it has been framed: "Lest as the result of these impious acts whole cities should perish together with their inhabitants; for we are taught by Holy Scripture, to wit that through these acts cities have perished with the men in them.... It is

on account of such crimes that famines and earthquakes take place, and also pestilences."

Before Justinian, both Constantine and Theodosius passed laws against sexual inversion, committing the offenders to "avenging flames." But these statutes were not rigidly enforced, and modern opinion on the subject may be said to flow from Justinian's legislation. Opinion, in matters of custom and manners, always follows law. Though Imperial edicts could not eradicate a passion which is inherent in human nature, they had the effect of stereotyping extreme punishments in all the codes of Christian nations, and of creating a permanent social antipathy.

II.

Table of Contents

VULGAR ERRORS.

Gibbon's remarks upon the legislation of Constantine, Theodosius, and Justinian supply a fair example of the way in which men of learning and open mind have hitherto regarded what, after all, is a phenomenon worthy of cold and calm consideration. "I touch," he says, "with reluctance, and despatch with impatience, a more odious vice, of which modesty rejects the name, and nature abominates the idea." After briefly alluding to the morals of Etruria, Greece, and Rome, he proceeds to the enactments of Constantine: "Adultery was first declared to be a capital offence ... the same penalties were inflicted on the passive and active guilt of pæderasty; and all criminals, of free or servile condition, were either drowned, or beheaded, or cast alive into the

avenging flames."[1] Then, without further comment, he observes: "The adulterers were spared by the common sympathy of mankind; but the lovers of their own sex were pursued by general and pious indignation." "Justinian relaxed the punishment at least of female infidelity: the guilty spouse was only condemned to solitude and penance, and at the end of two years she might be recalled to the arms of a forgiving husband. But the same Emperor declared himself the implacable enemy of unmanly lust, and the cruelty of his persecution can scarcely be excused by the purity of his motives. In defiance of every principle of justice he stretched to past as well as future offences the operations of his edicts, with the previous allowance of a short respite for confession and pardon. A painful death was inflicted by the amputation of the sinful instrument, or the insertion of sharp reeds into the pores and tubes of most exquisite sensibility." One consequence of such legislation may be easily foreseen. "A sentence of death and infamy was often founded on the slight and suspicious evidence of a child or a servant: the guilt of the green faction, of the rich, and of the enemies of Theodora, was presumed by the judges, and pæderasty became the crime of those to whom no crime could be imputed."

This state of things has prevailed wherever the edicts of Justinian have been adopted into the laws of nations. The Cathari, the Paterini, the heretics of Provence, the Templars, the Fraticelli, were all accused of unnatural crimes, tortured into confession, and put to death. Where nothing else could be adduced against an unpopular sect, a political antagonist, a wealthy corporation, a rival in literature, a

powerful party-leader, unnatural crime was insinuated, and a cry of "Down with the pests of society" prepared the populace for a crusade.

It is the common belief that all subjects of sexual inversion have originally loved women, but that, through monstrous debauchery and superfluity of naughtiness, tiring of normal pleasure, they have wilfully turned their appetites into other channels. This is true about a certain number. But the sequel of this Essay will prove that it does not meet by far the larger proportion of cases, in whom such instincts are inborn, and a considerable percentage in whom they are also inconvertible. Medical jurists and physicians have recently agreed to accept this as a fact.

It is the common belief that a male who loves his own sex must be despicable, degraded, depraved, vicious, and incapable of humane or generous sentiments. If Greek history did not contradict this supposition, a little patient enquiry into contemporary manners would suffice to remove it. But people will not take this trouble about a matter, which, like Gibbon, they "touch with reluctance and despatch with impatience." Those who are obliged to do so find to their surprise that "among the men who are subject to this deplorable vice there are even quite intelligent, talented, and highly-placed persons, of excellent and even noble character."[2] The vulgar expect to discover the objects of their outraged animosity in the scum of humanity. But these may be met with every day in drawing-rooms, law-courts, banks, universities, mess-rooms; on the bench, the throne, the chair of the professor; under the blouse of the workman, the cassock of the priest, the epaulettes of