

28 Abduction



I am in Kalamata. From my hotel balcony tonight I watched a boy walk past in the street below: a boy of fifteen or sixteen or so, in jeans and with a pigtail and with a cloth bag slung over his shoulder. And I suddenly recognized myself as I was at that age, so many years ago, stepping out into the world as boys do, with a sharpened awareness that isn't quite fear, but which isn't pure courage either, and an enterprise that isn't quite resolve. And something of me went out to him, a concern, a wish, a kinship – whatever it is that a man feels the need to give to a boy.

And this is, of course, a kind of love, it is the love that men feel towards boys. It is a love that is part protection and part comradeship. And in this it differs from the love of women, the love of girls and mothers. It doesn't need, and it doesn't wish to possess. It is inspired by a sense of collective purpose. It is about exploring and risk. Boys take the can-opener to life and prise it open. That is what they are for. And that is why we feel for them this extraordinary mixture of tenderness and admiration.

This love of boys is natural to men and is far more widespread than our society is willing to recognize. There is a conspiracy to deny it and suppress it. The denial comes in part from fear and in part from incomprehension, because men have been trained to think of themselves as incapable of such an emotion – and with good reason, because if men ever awoke to their true feelings in this regard it would be the end of the society that we know.

Harry von Raab, Kalamata, Greece, June

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I had not yet replied to Harry's letter from Kalamata, when I received another. This one was postmarked Heraklion in Crete. It was mostly about a new sculpture of Ganymede which he was in the process of acquiring. He called the new sculpture his 'Cretan abduction'.

I had seen a sculpture of the boy Ganymede on the altar of Harry's chapel. His new sculpture, he informed me, would be a similar composition. It was also a depiction of the boy Ganymede with Zeus in the form of an eagle. And it also showed Ganymede wearing a Phrygian cap. But this sculpture was in a quite different style, more Roman than Greek. He was having it shipped to his house in Crete, because Crete was the place where Zeus had kidnapped Ganymede.

I was familiar with the myth of Ganymede's abduction by Zeus but I was surprised to hear it was set so specifically in Crete as I had vaguely associated it with Troy. I had never given much thought as to how or where the myth originated because I didn't think of myths as events in the physical world. But for people in the Classical world it was obviously different. Myths for the ancient Greeks were as real as historical events.

It must have been around this time that I made the decision to accept Harry's invitation. I sent him a brief note suggesting a date on which I would like to come. And I asked him whether he could recommend something to read up on Crete before I got there. I received a postcard in reply, with only five words: 'Frazer, *The Golden Bough*. Harry'.

It was a frivolous response. Or perhaps it was simply Harry's way of putting me in my place. I hadn't read *The Golden Bough*, but I had seen the work quoted numerous times. And it had been on the reading list that the English faculty sent me before I came up to Cambridge. The complete edition ran to a massive 12 volumes. I had no hope of reading it before I left for Crete. But I found an abridged version in my local library and I decided to take it with me.

Meanwhile, one thing I discovered about Frazer's extraordinary book was that the title had been inspired by one of Turner's paintings. And it was in the Tate. Turner's *Golden Bough* wasn't currently on show, but a call to Jim Ede gained me access to the reserve collection. I saw a canvas that depicted a mysterious dreamscape which seemed to offer a glimpse into a world of myth and magic. In the event the painting was a good preparation for what awaited me in Crete.

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On the evening before her wedding my Mother asked me into her room. She told me she wanted my help choosing some jewellery to wear with her wedding dress. I was surprised, because she hardly ever wore jewellery. I could see she actually wanted to speak to me about something.

She began by unlocking the 'safe' drawer of her dressing table. She took a box from it that I hadn't seen before. Inside was a bundle wrapped in a blue silver-cloth.

'It's jewellery that belonged to your great grandmother. I mean your grandfather's mother on the Liscannor side. Your grandfather gave it to me soon after you were born.'

My Mother unwrapped the cloth and gently tipped the contents of the box onto the top of the dressing table. I saw necklaces and pendants. A chain of emeralds. Rings tied together by a green ribbon.

My Mother selected an emerald necklace and held it to her throat.

'What do you think?'

'Yes. It looks good.'

'Your grandfather gave me several unusual pieces that belonged to his mother.'

She sorted through the rest of the jewellery. There was a 'choker' stiff with diamonds, and a number of brooches and pendants. She picked out a pendant and examined it in her open hand. It was a leaf-shaped silver pendant with a design of green enamel.

'This one is for you.'

'For me?'

‘Your grandfather made me promise I would keep this for you and give it to you one day. He said for your twenty-first birthday. That used to be a milestone, your twenty-first. But things are changed nowadays.’

She held the pendant out to me and I took it from her.

‘When you look closely at the green of the leaf you see something inside it. Can you see it? I suppose it must be etched on the metal beneath the enamel. It’s cleverly done.’

I turned the pendant in the light. The enamel had an odd shimmering quality, and it seemed as if you could look below its surface. It was a while before I saw the snake.

‘Isn’t it strange?’ my Mother asked. ‘And do you see the engraving on the underside?’

I turned the pendant over. There was indeed an intricate design etched into the silver. It was a negative image, like the etching of a signet-ring, but shallower.

‘It’s a figure with outstretched arms. A woman, I think. And she looks as if she is holding two animals on leashes.’

‘Yes. Can you make out what she is holding?’

‘It’s hard to say. Dogs, perhaps. Or maybe lions.’

‘Maybe you need to look at it under a magnifier.’

She began gathering up the jewels. She wrapped them in the blue cloth and put them back in the box. I thought she was finished. But just as I was getting up she touched my arm lightly. I sat down again.

‘Do you remember John Padoe?’

‘Of course. He was part of your music evenings.’

‘That’s right. He says he met you a few weeks back in Cambridge. At the house of a man called Harry?’

‘Yes. It was a sort of symposium evening.’

‘You know that I have been friends with John a long time.’

‘I didn’t know.’

‘Yes, we go back some way.’

Silence.

‘You know that he is a psychiatrist?’

‘Yes.’

‘He has quite a lot to do with people in Cambridge. He has a connection to your college too.’

‘Yes. He seems to know a lot of people.’

‘Well, John is very discreet. I mean professionally very discreet. He would never talk about a patient or anything like that. But he felt he had to speak to me about Harry.’

‘What did he have to say?’

‘Nothing. He is not allowed to say anything. But he wanted to warn you.’

‘Warn me?’

‘Yes, in the friendliest possible way. He wants to warn you. He can’t tell you any more, but he thinks you should be careful about Harry.’

‘John will be coming to the wedding?’

‘Yes. How did you know?’

‘He mentioned it. When I met him. At Harry’s house.’

‘He said he can’t speak to you directly. But he wanted me to pass it on.’

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I met Vincent shortly after I came down from Cambridge at the end of the summer term. He was in funds again and suggested we meet for a meal in Saint Stephens Tavern, which was close to my home and also conveniently close to his office on Victoria Street. Afterwards we went for a walk along the Embankment. We retraced virtually the same route I had gone with Maurice only a few weeks earlier. But Vincent had never met Maurice and I didn’t tell Vincent about him. This evening we talked about Harry von Raab.

I had mentioned Harry to Vincent shortly after I had first met him. I described Harry’s contradictory relationship to the Catholic Church. I also told him about his interest in my Grandfather’s writings and his involvement in the coming conference on Mithraism. Vincent had done some research on Harry in the interval, but he had not unearthed very much. He had looked for works published under the name of Harry von Raab, but could find no more than a handful of specialist papers and some correspondence in academic journals. ‘He seems to know a lot about Minoan civilisation and to be something of a collector of art works. What is he up to in Cambridge?’

I gave Vincent a fairly detailed account of Harry’s recent *symposium* evening. Vincent seemed less impressed by my summary of the debate than in the names of the guests. He wondered why Harry, though he mixed with so many illustrious people, remained relatively obscure.

We had walked as far as Cleopatra’s Needle. On an impulse I led us away from the pavement and towards the plinth. We climbed the steps and circled the base of the obelisk.

‘I was here a couple of weeks ago,’ I remarked.

‘You’ve been in London that long?’

‘No. I came down just for a day and went back again the same night. I was checking out a painting.’

We are leaning against the base of the obelisk, facing one of the sphinxes. It is the same spot where I stood with Maurice, looking southwards along the river. A light rain has begun to fall, darkening the bronze of the sculpture and giving the sleek mounds of metal a glowing, luminescent halo. And I think how strange it is, this creature which has the head of a Pharaoh and the body and limbs of a gigantic lion. It was like an inversion of the Minotaur, which had the body of a man married to the head of a bull. Animal instinct ruled by the human intellect, as in

the Sphinx; or brute instinct hijacking a human body, as in the Minotaur. How can you tell the difference in practice?

I want to tell Vincent about what I have come to call ‘my opium night’, but I can’t find the right words to begin.

‘Did you notice the bomb damage?’ Vincent was pointing down towards the base of the granite plinth.

‘Bomb damage?’

‘It was nearly hit by a bomb during the first world war. One of the early Zeppelin raids. The bomb exploded on the pavement. There is shrapnel damage all along the side.’

I went back down to the street level to inspect it. There were indeed numerous pits and scars in the stone along the length of the plinth. But the massive bronze body seemed unscathed.

Meanwhile, Vincent was running his hands along the rear leg of the sphinx that was nearer the road.

‘Yes, here it is. Put your hand here.’

He guided my hand along the length of the sphinx’s paw. On the cold metal, between two claws, my fingers found a jagged hole. It was perhaps one or two inches long. I pushed my index finger inside it as far as the knuckle and withdrew it quickly in disgust. I noticed there was another, smaller, hole in the body of the sphinx higher up.

‘Was the obelisk itself damaged?’

Vincent shook his head. ‘I don’t think so. Only this sphinx and the base it is on.’

‘It is obscene.’

‘Obscene?’

‘You ship a sacred stone from an ancient civilisation thousands of miles away and erect it in a foreign city. That is evil enough. And then it gets bombed in your petty squabbles with a neighbouring tribe. You don’t think that is obscene?’

Vincent looks directly at me. ‘You are in a strange mood. Are you upset about something?’

I want to tell Vincent about Malik and Zain. About that evening. But I can’t find the right words to begin.

‘I told you that Harry von Raab is an eccentric.’

‘He certainly sounds a bit unusual.’ Vincent appears to be waiting for me to go on. ‘Is there more to the story?’

‘He seems to be getting a reputation for himself.’

I am startled at how strange and false my voice sounds. It could have been Peter Beauvarie speaking rather than myself.

‘A reputation?’

‘People have started talking about him.’

‘So what has he been doing?’

‘He keeps a couple of young boys at his house. They are from Morocco.’

We walked beside each other in silence for a couple of minutes.

‘How old are the boys?’

‘Fourteen or fifteen. It’s hard to be sure. Arab boys are rather different, aren’t they?’

‘You said the house is some distance from Cambridge? And that it is surrounded by security walls?’

‘Yes. It’s all walls and gates and cameras. Nobody could see what goes on there.’

‘So if nobody sees what he is up to, why are people talking?’

‘It’s not as simple as that. I told you about his strange attitude to the Church. On the one hand he seems genuinely drawn to the Church. He is friendly with the Chaplain in Cambridge. He turns up for tea at the chaplaincy at least once a week. And he seems to know about all the latest Church politics. If you hear him talking to guests you would get the impression that he is really devout and faithful. And then he will suddenly drop a bombshell remark that shocks everybody.’

‘A bombshell remark?’

‘Last time it was something about the sexual habits of the Pope. He seems to be an expert on priestly scandals.’

Vincent is trying to control his laughter.

‘I would like to come to one of your chaplaincy tea parties some day.’

‘I am sure you would enjoy it. But it’s a bit embarrassing for the Chaplain.’

‘Does he do it just for the devilment?’

‘That’s what I am trying to say. He goes to a lot of trouble to make himself look like a pious Catholic, and then he suddenly blows it all away. It’s the same with the boys. He keeps them discreetly out of sight behind a security wall, and then he parades them in front of his distinguished friends.’

‘Maybe he has nothing to hide. Perhaps he just likes shocking people?’

Once again I am on the verge of telling Vincent about the ‘opium night’. And once again I stay quiet.

‘But what you are really saying is that he fancies young boys and imports them for his pleasure.’

‘I don’t actually know what he does.’

‘But it looks that way?’

‘Yes, I suppose it does.’

‘Your friend puts me in mind of Oscar Wilde. He also conformed outwardly to the expected social norms, while flamboyantly flouting them. On paper, he was a conventionally married man; but in speech, manner, dress and behaviour he was studiously outrageous. It was as if he was

waving a pink flag and yelling 'Come and get me' at the top of his voice every time he appeared in public. The question is, why did he need to behave like that?

'What is your explanation?'

'I wonder. Perhaps it's to do with pressure. A closeted gay man is like a Jekyll and Hyde. Except that in the case of a gay man the Hyde is closer to his real self and is even more desperate to come out. And from what you tell me of your friend he has more reason than most to keep himself concealed.'

Neither of us spoke for a while after Vincent's last words. I was again on the brink of telling him what had happened on my last visit to Harry's house – on my 'opium' evening that I had spent with him and the two Moroccan boys. But the moment passed.

'Do you like him?' Vincent asked after some time.

'Like him?'

'Yes. I mean do you like your eccentric friend Harry. You sometimes talk of him as if he is an arrogant prick or a spoilt son of a millionaire.'

'I suppose there are some things I like about him.'

'And why, do you suppose, is he interested in you?'

'I don't know. I really don't know.'

'You don't think he's after you, do you?'

'I'm pretty sure he isn't.'

'So what is the attraction?'

'Tell me.'

'You must mean something to him.'

'But what?'

'I don't know. A part of the puzzle, perhaps.'

'The puzzle?'

'Why he is the way he is, perhaps.'

Vincent's words made me feel oddly uncomfortable. I didn't ask him to explain what he meant.

'Or perhaps he is simply looking for someone he can share it with. I mean someone who can understand him. Someone like himself.'

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I finally heard from Maurice. His brief escape to Cambridge had cost him dear. His parents placed him under house arrest. They talked of sending him to a school in Paris. 'Can I meet them?' I asked.

I was inspired by my memory of Vincent's first meeting with my Mother. I had been even younger then than Maurice was now. And I had gone missing for a long weekend with Rainer in

Vienna. My Mother had asked to meet my 'gentleman friend' and I had produced Vincent in place of Rainer. Vincent had charmed my Mother to a standstill. But as I noticed subsequently, she was disposed to support me in whatever relationship I entered into. Still, I doubt Rainer would have charmed her as much as Vincent.

It was presumptuous of me to think I could inspire as much confidence in Maurice's parents as Vincent had inspired in my Mother. Especially as they were likely to be much more hostile to their son's abductor than my Mother had been to mine. But it was worth a try. In the back of my mind was the prospect of taking Maurice with me to Crete.

I dressed carefully for the occasion. I had my hair cut. I was determined to look earnest and studious. My line was that I was keen for Maurice to study in Cambridge. I had wanted to show him round. I had been tricked by Maurice into thinking he had an extended half term weekend and that he had visited me in Cambridge with his parents' permission.

They were not taken in at all. At the end of term at the *Lycée* Maurice was whisked back to Paris and did not return to London. He sent several letters to my London address that my Mother forwarded to Harry's address in Crete. The next I heard from him was in August. He wrote to me from the International School in Geneva, where he was enrolled as a day pupil. He was living with a family who, like his father, were in the French diplomatic service.

And so I went alone to Crete.