

# No choice of road

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# No choice of Road

by *R. Young*

To J. B.

The three students who had taken the room next to Carl's could not have been much more than eighteen, for they had left school a few months before. On the evening of their arrival Carl had gone to their room to introduce himself, since the care of the rooms on the first floor and the welfare of the occupants were part of his duties. The boys' names were Roy, Norman and Stephen, all three coming from the state of New York, while Roy and Stephen had even been at the same school.

Roy was studying law. He was small and quick of movement. The first thing he did while unpacking was to put a large photograph of a girl on his desk. Norman was dark and his features showed signs of achieving a harmonious and good-looking masculinity. He came from a good family; he had wanted to become a dancer, but after two years had given it up and acceded to his parents' wishes by going to a university. Stephen, the third of the trio, was very tall, but he still had the uncertain movements of a young colt which has not yet learned to control the movements of his body. He had taken up chemistry, but his great passion was flying. All these details and many others from their lives Carl had discovered in the course of time. On that first evening they stood there, polite and shy, partly because he was one of the teachers, partly because he was much older than they, but principally because he was a European. On that first evening Carl stayed ten minutes with the newcomers, then he went on to the other rooms on the same floor to meet the other new students.

This first meeting marked the beginning of their life together. Hundreds of students in the course of the years had passed through Carl's hands, but he soon realized how very fortunate he was in his new neighbors. Though at the end of their first year all three of them were still self-conscious in their dealings with Carl, he could not help feeling that slowly and almost imperceptibly their attitude toward him was changing.

This could be felt more strongly at the beginning of their second year. Long absence lets people feel what their surroundings and the people connected with them are worth. When the three boys and Carl had returned from the long summer vacation and two of them, Roy and Stephen, had been chosen members of the house-committee, they all knew each other much better. All three belonged to that not-too-numerous group of students which appreciated the environment of the small hostel. Surrounded by a large park, it was situated in one of the suburbs of the big town and offered peace and quietness to those willing to experience them.

It was this peace and quietness which had become one of the most cherished possessions of Carl's life. His last years in Europe after the end of the war had been a sequence of struggles, mental and physical.

He was no longer young, and the appointment to this American university had been for him something of a miracle. He had taken control of his own life again and was greatly helped therein by his life in this small student hostel. That he was different, that he preferred people of his own sex, held no danger here; he knew from the course of his life that young men did not constitute any temptation for him. Not even the atmosphere of the big bathroom was able to change this. Of course there was delight for Carl to see the well-developed youths naked, but desire remained entirely at bay. There was only one temptation to which Carl willingly fell victim, that of influencing these boys by showing them what life could hold in the way of beauty and difficulties, by assisting them as much as he could in the intricate business of growing up.

In this way their second year together at the hostel passed. Slowly the boys next-door got into the habit of coming to Carl with all their big and small worries, trusting that he would find a way for them to deal with all the problems which arose. Roy was the least complicated of the three. Knowing very much what he wanted from life, emotionally secure in his childhood-friendship with his girl, he was easy to lead. Norman offered more of a problem. Would he turn to man or woman, Carl often wondered. One evening Norman asked him to read the «Journals» of a writer who had recently died—an author whose intelligence and intellect were more than equal to the task of presenting the fact of a close friendship between two men. A book which might have proved to a certain degree dangerous in the hands of a boy not sure of his own way. A few nights later Carl handed the book back to Norman, telling him that in a different meaning of the word the book might be called unnatural and presented only certain aspects of a theme on which all sorts of controversies are heaped. By discussing frankly with Norman the key-problem of the book, Carl soon discovered that their open conversation had freed the boy from some uspoken trends of thought, the effect being that Carl came into closer and better touch with Norman. Stephen, the third of the boys, had outgrown most of his coltish movements in the course of these two years; his outer and inner contours were drawn more sharply now. He belonged to that very small group of young people able to make fun of their elders in an ironical and good-humored way without ever infringing upon the fundamental laws of good manners.

Their third year began. Carl and the students had by this time become very good friends. No evening passed without the students' asking Carl to share late supper with them in their room; when he was kept busy by pressing work they came around to give him his coffee. The first six months of their last year at the university passed; they formed a chain of days the end of which Carl anticipated with deep regret.

However the time still ahead of them held unexpected twists, as Carl was soon to learn. As it was, there was no warning for Carl of a change to come. There was Roy and there was Norman. There was Stephen, with his dark eyes and thick brown hair, a funny upturned nose and above all a ready laugh accompanying his good-humored jests. Nothing had ever yet revealed to Carl how much Stephen's presence had become an essential part of his own existence. All he thought when he saw the boy was how rewarding it would be to have a boy like this for a son.

Then one evening the change came, quite unexpectedly. Roy and Norman had gone to town, and at the usual hour Stephen knocked at Carl's door and invited him to late supper. It was a warm evening in early summer; the window in the boys' room was wide open when Carl entered. Stephen had been flying that morning and the fever of excitement was still in his veins. He recounted all the details of his flight to Carl while they had their coffee and Carl smoked. Then Stephen stood up to switch on the small wireless-set, of which the boys were very proud as they had built it themselves. At that precise moment, never to be forgotten, the change happened. Carl was sitting comfortably in an easy chair next to the chest of drawers upon which the set stood and Stephen was bending very close to him over the chest of drawers. This proximity made Carl look at the supple tall body of the boy who stood so close to him. He saw the upper part of the body which narrowed down from broad shoulders to slender hips, so slim indeed that the pullover hung loosely around the waist. Part of Stephen's shirt had come out of his trousers. That didn't mean a thing, Carl told himself angrily. Hadn't he seen the boy many times naked in the bathroom? What had changed, after all? But his eyes went now to the irregular and yet so harmonious profile of the face; he saw the dark, thick mop of hair, the youthful scent of which he suddenly became aware as Stephen nearly touched him. And suddenly Carl felt that a curtain was drawn apart with lightning speed, and the longing which came with the light — to be permitted for once to touch this hair with his hand — made Carl realize that he had loved Stephen without knowing it.

Nothing happened. Carl's hand remained quietly in his lap. However he was no longer able to control his breath; breathing, indeed, became so painful that after some moments he rose to go back to his own room. Stephen, who was still standing near the set, asked Carl with a friendly smile why he was leaving so early tonight. But pressing work for the next day provided a credible excuse.

Nothing else ever happened, for nothing had changed after all. Carl's realization of the fact that he had learned to love Stephen was only his own concern. He took it for what it was — a fact with which he had to reckon, as any fulfillment was out of the question. He himself had been eighteen years old — two years younger than Stephen was now — when the course of his own life had been changed by a man who in the end had nearly destroyed him. Today he would be the one trying to change the course of a boy's life. There was not a shadow of doubt that this must never happen.

Carl lived near to Stephen for another six months — six months which gave him time to prepare himself for the final parting. Unexpectedly these months passed by without pain, since, in exchange for all which did not and should not happen, Carl was compensated by the inner warmth flowing from Stephen towards him.

The finals of the three youngsters came; all of them passed. On degree day their parents arrived. Carl was able to face Stephen's parents with a clear conscience and to tell them truthfully how fond he had grown of their son. Stephen must have told them a lot about Carl; they behaved toward him as if he were a member of the family and asked

him to stay with them whenever he might have the chance to do so. He would always be sure of a warm welcome.

Stephen left the next day. Standing beside his parents' car, he suddenly gripped Carl's hands with his own and pressed them tightly. For once there was no smile on his face as he stood there looking down questioningly into Carl's face. It was a strangely reluctant boy whom Carl had to push with a joke into the car.

Some weeks later Stephen was called up into the American Air Force; his greatest wish had been granted. As Carl read the letter containing the news, he thought: May Fate be kind to him and not let him be sent to the area of combat.

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## James Barr

*Profile of an American Author by R. Young*

On the strength of two published books it may seem an exaggeration to rank an author among the very few able to impart a new complexion to the difficult theme of homosexuality, and by reason of this fact and his excellent literary style to place him in the company of such well-known writers as André Gide and Marcel Proust. But this statement is true in the case of James Barr, the American author, who so far has published one novel «Quatrefoil» and one book of short stories titled «Derricks».

What distinguishes James Barr from other modern writers on the theme of homosexuality — writers whose numbers are steadily increasing both in the US and in England — is the fact that for James Barr homosexuality is only one element, though a decisive one, in the lives of his protagonists, and that he never loses sight of their existence as a whole. Though Barr gives the homosexual problem a prominent part in his writings, he shows his characters at the same time not only as homosexuals but as complex human beings. By this process he successfully avoids the weakness inherent in so many fictional writings on homosexuality — the presentation of this phenomenon as a «special case». Quite rightly the author never questions for a moment the right of his characters to be taken as «normal» individuals, not to be judged exclusively by the fact of their being homosexual but as people of a highly developed and valuable mental make-up. This point of view is probably one of the reasons why one receives such deep satisfaction from the reading of Barr's books. To give one example: his short story «Success-Story». This depicts the slow building-up of a friendship between two business partners over a number of years. No sentimental trash about these two men is to be found in this story, and except for one paragraph there is no so-called «love-incident» in it; but the inner tension of the story and the presentation of the problem of how much patience is required and how many factors are involved in the formation of a lasting