

"Slowly, slowly, gently, gently"

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P R E F A C E

With luck, in 500 years the world will regard the problem of homosexuality in our society with the same mixture of amusement and horror which we now look upon the witch burnings of the Dark Ages. But the conflict of homo- and heterosexual in society is very much of the here and now. Perhaps it is more nearly solved than many of us realize. Certainly the answers all of us seek are about us every moment of our days if we are shrewd enough to identify them as such. Doesn't only then remain for those answers to be translated over and over into terms society can appreciate and must accept until their weight pulls the scales of Justice down to the equality we must have? If this is true then the burden of proof does indeed rest without favoritism on each of us who calls himself homosexual. If this is true, then the fact that I successfully operate my farm here in my own country and have thereby earned the respect and good will of my neighbors may do more to bring about the honorable recognition of homosexuality than the fact I have written two books on the subject. At any rate it is a valuable thought to keep in mind when organized society sanctimoniously tells us that we must first earn the right to responsibility before we can be accepted on equal terms. Should we win our case at this time, our burden of proof might easily be enjoyed by dozens of generations to come.

The following story is such an attempt to translate homosexual values into terms the heterosexual can accept. Like most fiction, it is based on and contains much factual detail.

James Barr

«Slowly, Slowly, Gently, Gently»

by James Barr

To H. F. H.

Der Kreis is proud and happy to publish, for the first time anywhere, the following story by the noted American writer, James Barr. Reproduction, translation, etc. in entirety or in part, without express permission from the author, is prohibited.

«At last. It's time to go.»

Simon smiled at his hostess to belie his awareness of the first couple across the room moving circuitously toward them, and the door. Guests at Daphne's parties always resembled the characters in a modern ballet; either figuratively whirling around the room in a rollicking waltz or figuratively drooping in studied attitudes of exhaustion. Aloud Simon said, «I really haven't any idea if my wife will arrive next month or next year, Daphne.» He laughed a little. «When you have turned sixty and lived apart for fifteen years as Betta and I have done, you can't really pretend to care very much one way or another.»

Daphne moved her fat, white shoulders beneath their lace and drew in her plump, round mouth. «Betta has given you a rotten life, hasn't she, Simon?» She extended her hand sympathetically and Simon squeezed it for her.

«That's one way of looking at it. The other is that she's been rather decent about leaving me my freedom without the unpleasantness of a definite break.»

«Well», Daphne's tone was philosophical, «you aren't bitter, and you haven't taken up with secretaries or shop girls». She glanced at her hand lying loosely in his for a moment and then carefully removed it. «You know, Simon, I suppose that's what we all admire about you. You're so big about everything . . . and with such a naturalness.»

«My thanks, but what makes you so sure I'm not supporting a harem of shop girls in the city,» Simon asked lightly.

«Central City isn't that big, my old darling. Its wealthy unattached are too scarce not to live their lives in an aquarium of public curiosity. One suspect apartment and there's the gambit.»

The murmur of guests broke into party laughter for a moment and died away. There was fatigue in the air; even the shadows seemed to be wilting. Parties should end at midnight, Simon thought, as the ache of sixty odd years stabbed him viciously in the back. And this new weariness that he'd known only since last week, since last Thursday morning to be precise, was this to be his lot the rest of his life? He told himself it couldn't be. Tomorrow night, as soon as Peter was safely on his way, he'd be in bed by nine o'clock every night, as his doctor had ordered. The thought made him smile, but the question surrounding Peter brought him back from that blessed, beckoning future. With relief he watched the first departing couple approach and he stood up, giving his hand to his hostess.

«So soon, my sweets», Daphne asked, pulling her bulk to its feet.

«It has been fun, dear», the pretty woman said, «but Steve has to be up early in the morning. I'll see you for lunch though. Don't forget.» She turned to Simon. «Lean down, darling, so I can say good-night.» To Daphne she explained, «I just can't help myself. Everytime I see that lovely gray hair, I think of my father.» She took Simon's face in her hands and put her youth against his cheek and temple. «Night, you old sweetheart», she said softly.

«Goodnight, Leota . . . Steve.» Simon gave his free hand to the man.

«You must be very proud of Pete», the man said. «We wanted to give him a little party of some kind, but if he's leaving tomorrow —». He made a gesture of emptiness.

«I am proud», Simon replied. «Quite a step up for him. But then we'll all be even prouder of him one day soon, I imagine.»

«I know we will», Leota agreed. «'Night again.»

The couple went away taking Simon's heart with them for soon they would lie down, relax and sleep. Simon looked at Daphne and the couch inquiringly but she held up a restraining hand.

«Oh no, Simon. It's much too hard to get up and down. The rest of them will be clearing out in a few minutes.» She filled her girdled bosom carefully, sighed and looked around her guests, now beginning the well known, pre-departure milling. «Petey and the young man from New York seem to have hit it off very well.»

«Oh, really?» For the first time in the past wracking hours of small talk Simon allowed himself to look toward the corner where he knew two young men were sitting, completely absorbed in their conversation. «I hadn't noticed.»

Peter's dark coloring was like an encircling thrust against the fair, yellow haired lad with him, Simon thought. The blond New Yorker was talking with animation, his hands lifted slightly with statuesque grace. It was as if Peter, in his quiet magnificence were storming the other's mind with his mere presence and the young Easterner was in a delighted frenzy of handing it over. Simon knew that frenzy so well.

«They do seem to be hitting it off», Simon agreed and added, «That was really a sauce with the meat this evening, my dear.»

Daphne chuckled. «Don't worry, darling. I promised you my man would teach it to that lazy cook of yours. I won't forget. «She studied Peter as she spoke. «You know, Simon, Petey turned out to be a capital investment after all, didn't he?»

«Had you ever doubted he would,» Simon asked with surprise.

«Well», Daphne drew the word out, «you know what usually happens when a rich man subsidizes a poor boy. The boy feeds generously for a few years and then marries and settles for a fraction of those ambitions that first attracted the interest of his benefactor.» Daphne took another deep breath and sighed unhappily against her girdle. «Betta didn't like Petey, did she? Too bad too. She might have been his mother as much as you've been his father.» Simon ignored the remark's undertones because of their shabby antecedents.

«I think Betta liked him too much,» Simon pretended to be thoughtful. Better to face a woman like Daphne with a half truth than no truth at all. He looked at the young man under discussion, who had leaned forward to nod with enthusiasm to his companion. Not one perfect feature had been bribed by Age into revealing Peter's thirty-two years. He had changed so little in the thirteen years Simon had known him. Physically he was still so - - - perfect, as he had been at nineteen.

«I suspected as much,» Daphne lifted her probing eyes to his. «But this is the first time you've ever said anything about it. He has been like a son to you, hasn't he, Simon?»

«Oh yes. He has given me so much, and it has been the greatest experience of my life to watch him grow. Almost fifteen years since I first saw him, you know.»

«Simon, did you have anything to do with this appointment he's getting,» Daphne asked with a sudden frankness that was almost nasty. She would go on trying in her timid, middle-classed way to damage what she couldn't be a part of, he thought.

Simon repressed a weak belch and shook his head. «Not a thing. That wasn't a part of the original bargain. I was only to supply him the money to get his doctorate.» He paused. «He has been receiving offers from various colleges all over the country to head their departments since his papers on Hawthorne and Poe have been coming out, but he knew what he wanted and sat tight where he was, working himself up a little each year, until the big offer came. Then he accepted it. That's

all there is to it. He has many friends back there. In a sense, it will be rather like going home.»

«And what will you do now», Daphne asked. «Invest in another son?»

«Oh, I've done that several times», Simon smiled, «but none of them have turned out like Peter.»

«I can imagine», Daphne said with a chemic mixture of dry brightness in her tone.

«Well», Simon said quickly, «I think we'd better stop them for tonight. They can continue this budding romance of brains back East. It's late and I want some sleep.»

Daphne waddled across the room on his arm.

«Such a clatter», she interrupted the two young men. «Remind me never to invite you both to another dinner. Don't you know it's the duty and privilege of the younger generation to entertain us senile old husks? You're a very selfish pair.»

«I'm sorry, Daphne», Peter's near lisp caressed her. «It's all my fault. He has quite as great a passion for the moderns of music as I have.» Peter indicated his flushed, smiling companion with a nod of his exquisitely shaped head.

«He has promised to come down to New York,» Peter's blond companion confided happily. «We'll have a terrific time.»

For a moment Simon's heart grew weak at the thought and then eased itself into a dark pond of quiet misery that had grown wider and deeper in the past few months. Because he could not prevent himself, he said. «It's getting late, Peter.»

«So it is, Simon,» Peter pushed back the cuff from his watch and then took Simon's face into his dark, soft eyes in that strange manner of his that was as satisfying as a caress.

«Perhaps he doesn't realize what is happening between them,» Simon told himself and in the next instant told himself not to be a fool. Simon had made up his mind what he would do when this very thing occurred and this was no time for dallying.

Peter turned to his new friend and gave his hand. «It has been a pleasure, our talk this evening. I'll write you once I'm settled in for the semester, but don't expect it too soon.»

The young man's face fell. «But,» he protested, «you said you might manage a weekend in Maine with the family before the semester started.»

Simon felt suddenly toward his protégé and the boy as he had years ago when he had assured himself that his own intentions to Peter were honorable and had known subconsciously they were not.

«He'll be there,» Simon said to the young man, thus telling Peter of his awareness of the situation he had watched develop all evening. «Drop in the weekend you want him and I'll wager you will find him doing nothing at all. He'll welcome you with open arms.»

«I will, Sir,» the boy beamed again. He seemed a nice chap. Good family, Daphne said, worked in his father's offices. He'd be good for Peter, Simon told himself automatically and then involuntarily put his hand to his forehead to stop the ache there.

«Have you a headache,» Peter said quickly, a frown appearing between his own brows.

«Not bad,» Simon smiled away his anxiety. «Too much of Daphne's excellent Medoc, I think.»

«We'd better go,» Peter said, and to Daphne he promised, «I'll see that he is in bed within the hour.»

«See that you do,» Daphne took his hand in both of hers. «And, Petey, my darling, don't forget us out here in the sticks. Write. And come back as often as you can.»

«I shall,» Peter reassured her. «But you must come East to see me too. I'll take you into town and we'll kick up our heels.»

«Agreed,» Daphne laughed at the absurd idea.

«Good. And thanks so much for the party. Marvelous meat sauce. I wish Simon's cook could make it.»

«He will when you come back,» Daphne said.

«Never like yours, Daphne. Never like yours.»

As Peter said his last goodbyes, the four of them walked to the door.

«Shall I have someone bring your car up. Simon,» Daphne asked.

«Not necessary. Just a few steps down the drive.»

«Goodnight.»

«Goodnight.»

«Goodnight.»

«Goodnight.»

The door closed, Simon put on his hat and they walked down the shadowed drive to the automobile Simon would have shipped East the next day. Knowing Peter's dislike for driving at night, Simon got in behind the wheel.

«Hadn't you better let me drive because of your headache?»

«It isn't far. Do you want the top down?»

«Let's not,» Peter smiled, «I'm feeling much too friendly.» He linked his arm through Simon's and pulled himself closer over the seat. For a moment Simon forgot his unhappiness until he asked himself, «Is he friendly because of me — or the lad from New York,» and his unhappiness returned.

The motor whirred for a few seconds and then carried them in powerful, near silence down the curving road toward the highway a mile away. Peter looked up at his friend.

«You know, Simon,» he said thoughtfully, «I've always felt somehow that Daphne knows all about us. Since it is my last night here, I can tell you.»

«Why? She has never said anything to either of us.»

«That's just it. If she were less suspicious, I think she would. You're very old friends, aren't you?»

«I knew her when I didn't have a single movie house or she a lone oil well.»

«And she is much too timid to ever be openly critical of you.»

«Perhaps you are right.»

The car pulled up the grade to the highway. They waited for a pair of headlights to comet past.

(to be continued)