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Autor: Barr, James
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«Slowly, Slowly, Gently, Gently»

by James Barr

To H.F.H. (continued)

«No argument on the point, Simon?»

«No argument.»

«Simon?»

«Yes?»

«I'll be glad when we are home.»

Their hands met quickly, but the old urgency they had always known was not quite there.

Simon's elevator took them from the garage to the penthouse in one silent, unbroken leap. Simon opened the door with his key and followed Peter inside. Cool air hummed softly through the concealed vent above the door and Peter shivered at the abrupt change.

«I can never figure it out; I've always been told that cold air goes down, but I'm always cold from the waist up,» he laughed and turned to put his arms about Simon and kiss him on the lips. «Simon, what is wrong with you? Is it my leaving after all? Until last week you seemed so reconciled, even glad for me.»

«Nothing is wrong, Pete. I'm just — a little tired, I guess.»

«Would you like a nightcap, Simon?»

«No. Would you?»

«Not particularly. Come over and lie down on the coach. I'll rub your head for you.»

They walked through the long room to the high windows over the city. Peter sat at one end of the long, elephant-gray couch and Simon lay down with his head in his lap. With his fingers, Peter closed his eyes and started stroking his temples.

«That's wonderful,» Simon murmured and a throbbing quiet settled down over them.

«Simon, do you remember the first time I came here?»

«I think so. Yes. Betta was here, wasn't she?»

«Yes. Getting packed to leave for California. You thought she'd be gone before we arrived, but she wasn't, so we all had to have dinner together and then sit around later listening to the election returns. Roosevelt got in for his second term that night.»

«You know, I'd forgotten that.»

«I'm surprised. You were so worked up over it at the time. You were all for Landon. 'A man from this section of the country is just what we need,' you kept saying. And I was terrified you'd ask me how I felt about the election. The New Deal was very much on my conscience that night.»

«I can well imagine'» Simon chuckled. «I used to frighten you. Actually, I wasn't concerned in the least about that election, but I had to have something to bluster about before you and Betta.» Simon opened his eyes and smiled up through Peter's fingers.

«I didn't want to leave here that night,» Peter remembered. «I was so afraid I'd committed some social blunder with my new, green manners. I was even afraid that our great attraction was all on my side.»

«After you left, it was all I could do not to follow you down to the university,» Simon confessed.

«You told me that the next night.»

«Ah, now that night I remember a good deal more vividly. The horrors of conscience that you put me through the next few days.»

Their laughter was the gentle agitation of wind on a reflecting pool.

«Simon, what would have happened to you if I hadn't demanded to see you personally the day I applied for a job?»

«Oh, I suppose I'd have divorced Betta. Perhaps I'd have married again. Who can say? But what would have happened to you?»

«The beginning of bitterness, disillusionment, I imagine. I'd have gotten another job and gone on to school. I remember that your theatre was the last hope before I attacked the dishwashing jobs. There was three whole dollars a week difference between being an usher in your balcony and washing dishes. When I left your offices I was a king.» Peter smiled slowly. «You know, Simon, those next two years were rich ones for me.»

«For me too. I couldn't decide how much I really disliked you. Bursting into my office that first day, insinuating that I, as a fat, bloated capitalist, owed you a job to enable you to get an education and thus preserve the finer things of life that I could never hope to understand.»

«Simon, I didn't.»

«Not that first interview perhaps, but later. You were always in my hair or on my conscience. The head usher was always complaining to the manager about your broken hours and the burned out flashlight batteries. He didn't know you were studying by them. How on earth did you ever manage to hide your books on those skin tight uniforms?»

«I'd pull in my stomach, which wasn't hard to do in those days, and put one or two under my belt. I remember only Plato seemed to fit there comfortably. Those uniforms were really designed, weren't they?» Peter laughed. «Do you remember the time my new uniform disappeared one Sunday afternoon. We thought someone had stolen it and you went through the lockers yourself. Then, when it turned up at the tailor's where I had left it, do you remember how silly I looked when I told you?» — «You know, that episode really delighted me, Petey. It was the only time in the entire two years when your eyes didn't have that 'well-why-don't-you-do-something about me' look in them. I used to dread it, then about the end of that time, I anticipated it.»

«I was always so self-conscious when you came by, Simon. I wished you wouldn't, and I was so glad when you did. Once you told me to fix my tie and I hated you for days.» Peter gave him a soft blow on the jaw. «I used to daydream a lot about you in those days.»

«Nice daydreams?»

«Pretty elemental. I wasn't very wise.»

«Remember the day you asked me for money to go East for your degree?»

«I remember the day you agreed to give it to me better. I was so legal about the whole thing, two and a half percent interest, a note and all the rest of it.» His laugh held a trace of cynicism. «And I've never repaid you a dime.»

Simon opened his eyes, took the hands from his face and held them. For a second his expression was serious but it cleared when he saw the face above him held nothing of the tone. He joked, «I'd better sue you I guess.»

«Too late, too late. I'm leaving the state.»

Simon kissed the hands, closed his eyes again and the stroking continued. A clock in the city below chimed three quarters of the dying hour; struck twice; and chimed the first quarter of the next. Simon wished he would grow drowsy but it was impossible while his mind was so full of what he must yet do.

«Simon, what will happen to us now?»

«I don't know.» From habit Simon made his mind blank.

«Will you come East to me often?»

«I'll try. Will you fly back here three weekends in a row again and

«You were a devil to let me do that.»
flunk another semester of Latin?»

«I was tremendously flattered. Perhaps that was the first time I felt that I was growing old.»

«Don't say that'» Peter laughed, but with a trifle too much vehemence.

Simon frowned. He might as well resolve this situation for them now as tomorrow. He put his elbows against the cushions to sit up.

«Don't sit up too quickly,» Peter cautioned. «How is the head?»

«At peace, thanks.» They looked at each other for a moment before Simon began quietly, «Petey, there is something on my mind. I'd like to clear it up before you leave.»

«Great Scott, Simon,» Peter laughed, «don't sound so like a Great White Father.»

Simon smiled but returned to his frown. «Pete, I am an old man. Let's not try to submerge the fact any longer, and you are still young.»

«Is this the prelude of getting rid of me,» Peter asked tensely.

«Heavens no! But, well, I think a lot of things are ending for us, and some are just beginning for you.»

«If you think,» Peter interrupted him, «that my leaving will end anything between us, I shan't go.»

Simon stood up and walked to the terrace doors. He opened them a bit and came back. «I know that,» he mused, «but I want you to go. You'd be miserable the rest of your life if you didn't. If you were in your sixties instead of your thirties, you'd understand how I feel at this time. I hope you never have to make this decision, but then I don't think you will. There's very little difference in your age and —» He stopped abruptly, realizing too late that he had said too much. Peter nodded slowly.

« — and the young man from New York tonight. I was afraid you'd think that.»

«He means a lot to you already, Peter. You must have recognized that.»

«I've only met him. He means nothing to me.»

«As yet,» Simon finished for him.

I didn't say that,» Peter answered.

«You should. With people of our sort, things happen that way, and the initiated can always see them.»

Peter was silent for half a minute. «We've never had anything like this before,» he spoke with a shade of disappointment, «nothing serious, at any rate.»

«There has never been any need for it,» Simon pointed out. «The parts of our lives we've exchanged with each other have been so concise in their devotion, so packed with intensity, so genuine. You've meant so much to me for so long, Peter, that I've no words to express it. But it is not right for me to let you go away now, still feeling that you are bound to me at my age.»

«Don't say that!» Peter said again. «Physically, you're more of a man right now than I've ever been or will be.»

«I'm not speaking of my physical well being, Petey, though even that is tired, worn down — but, thanks to you, so very satisfied. I couldn't keep up with you if I wanted. Right now, I just feel that I want to sit on the south side of a plain, dull wall and soak sun deep into my bones the rest of my life.»

The younger man studied him for a few minutes, analyzing his words. «And what of the need for me, Simon? Will you tell me now that it is gone too?»

«No. But it isn't as strong as it was a few years ago either.

Abstinence should sit lightly upon me now. That is where the dignity and wisdom of age come to save us.» He paused before he said reluctantly, «I had a letter from Betta the other day. She suggested that she might be stopping by for a while. There were certain undertones. Perhaps she is tired too. We could have quite a nice ending together, if that is what she wants now. We always got along.»

«Simon, what is in that wonderful heart of yours now? Why are you saying all these irrelevant things to me now? My going away will end nothing for us. Though we've never said much about it, we both knew that what we have would endure all our lives.»

«Yes, it will endure, Peter. I'm — I'm just saying that our friendship is entering another stage. We'll be very close but not — Oh, hang it all, I'm a whirling ass in this role of noble martyr! It hurts like the devil to say all this! It hurts like the devil! Not with the sharp pangs I'd have known ten years ago, but with an ache all over, deep and hard.» In his embarrassment Simon turned away as swiftly Peter came to him.

«Simon, what happened to you last Thursday while I was in Dallas?»

«Why, nothing that I know of. Why do you ask?»

Peter shook his head. «No, Simon, not this time. You've withheld information from me before, but always to save me unpleasantness and I have loved you for that quality. But this time I must know. Too much of the future turns on it for us both. So, what did happen to you while I was away? Tell me, Simon, please,» he urged.

Simon's eyes sought the wall to his side. Petey was right. He had to know some day. And it might help to resolve this question he was floundering in now. Peter would learn of it soon if he'd heard rumors and it would be better to tell him now, thus dispelling any terrors of misinformation. Simon's words were slow as he said.

«All right, Peter, I will tell you. The doctor called it a heart attack.»

«Simon!»

«No, no, Petey, it isn't as bad as that. Only a small, insignificant one.»

«But will there be others?»

«Yes, Petey, there will be others. That is why the doctor cautioned me to start relaxing, to start growing old in earnest. Delegate more of the work to Le Blanc, get more rest, stop drinking and smoking, avoid worry and excitement — all the impossible things doctors tell heart patients. You see, Petey, whether we like it or not, I'm going to have to be an old man after all. Isn't it strange. I've taken excellent care of my health all my life, expecting to live robustly to be eighty or ninety as all my people have before me, and now, at sixty three, I'm being put on the bench to watch the rest of the game.»

«Simon, I'm not going East.»

«Yes, you are, Pete. I won't allow you to give up a career to nursemaid me. It would spoil everything between us.»

«But you need me now.»

«No. Not in that way. You will be giving me more happiness by accomplishing your ambitions.»

«We've had so much together, I can't let you go on alone. Will you come East and live with me there?»

«No. It is a great satisfaction for a man to end his days where he began them. It perfects his circles. I shall remain here.»

«Oh, Simon, I — —»

«Petey, look at it this way. I had my life before you came into it. It was already full of a happiness that you intensified and made sublime with your own personality. Yet there were over forty years that you had not shared with me. You did not resent them. Now you have many years before you in which I cannot share. Reasonably I cannot resent them. I've given it a lot of thought and this is the way it must be, the way I want it. Don't make it more difficult for me, Petey.»

The reflection of Peter's thoughts moved eloquently across his face for a long while.

«Yes,» Peter thought, probing the older man's face, «he has made up his mind to this and, Simon being Simon, one cannot offer a different idea boldly. How like a child he is in his consideration of us — even after thirteen years.» Peter smiled to himself, beginning to understand what he must do. This attitude toward their difference in age had been the most vicious challenge Peter had had to face all these years, for it had never been conquered. And the problem posed by the young New Yorker this evening — what was his name? Good God he'd forgotten it already — was not a new one, though until now Peter had been able to keep all of them from flaring into actual words. How could Simon believe that any small part of these many blessed years could be effaced by any other than himself? Yet he did believe it and he had never ceased to torture himself with the thought. How could he doubt their rare dependence upon one another after all this time? He was so big about everything else in his life, so childlike in his lack of assurance about those small elements of doubt in their life together. If the world of Simon's friends knew him as I do, Peter reflected with amusement, what a different aspect he would wear. They'd expect him still to be flying kites.

Well, this was really just another job to do, but coming at a most unhandy time what with Simon's attack (he was a bit surprised that Simon had told him about it after all) and his leaving for the East. First, Peter knew, he'd have to manage a talk with Le Blanc before he left, urge him to relieve Simon of business matters as completely as possible. Then he'd have to look about for a place back East, near the college once he was settled in, something big enough to challenge Simon's love of investment, and one of those New England farms would be novel enough to do that. With that Peter knew he could persuade him to move back East where they could be together again.

Simon was really very sentimental, Peter smiled to himself. Ending his days where he had begun them indeed! And Betta wouldn't spend six weeks in a row in the Middle West so long as Miami and Hollywood remained on the map. Leopards and Betta had everything in common.

But in the meantime, it would be well for Simon to relax and rest up for a few months alone. Let him steep himself in his own self-concocted miseries for a while. When he tired of the brew, he'd forget it as completely as he had similar draughts in the past. Then Peter would be ready for him. Beneath everything else Simon knew all these things too; his failure to admit them was a part of that childlike possessiveness he would always have for the one person in his life he had truly loved.

But now, Peter knew, he had to play the game Simon's way for a while. Aloud he said in his tenderest voice.

«Simon, my own Simon, I think I understand. You want me to be cruel to spare you the hurt of hurting me. No theatrics for us, is that the beginning of it? Always you have hated the dramatic in every situation where you were involved. This is your way of saying the end is here at last. We still mean the same to each other, but you want me to have that — that one thing you feel you can no longer give me. I understand, Simon. I won't make it difficult for you any longer. And you are being noble, Simon, awfully noble, but on you it is your greatest face.» He turned the older man until they faced each other squarely. «I'm glad you're making me feel free. It is so characteristic of you. But, believe me, no one shall ever occupy the place in me that you have at this moment. Does that help? Does that make the pain a bit more bearable? Is his some of what you want me to say to you now, Simon?»

Simon nodded and with real effort said. «Once, at the very beginning of our relationship, I was afraid of loving you, Petey, afraid of what I might do to you, then much later of what you might do to me. I got over the first when I saw you become what you wanted to be. Now — — now I know you will never hurt me, and that you will not hurt yourself because of me, and these are good things to know. All this has been so right for us. The romantic attachment remains intact.» Simon smiled. «Some things, Petey, like maturity and old age, are accomplished not by effort.»

Simon stood back from him and dropped his arms.

«I think,» he said, «we'd better have that nightcap now, and you'd better make mine milk.»

«Two milks, then. As always, you order for the both of us, Simon.»

The room was empty when Peter returned with the glasses. Seeing the terrace door all the way open and the breeze stirring the curtains, Peter's heart paused for a few seconds with fear. Suppose Simon had —. He rushed through the room but pulled himself up short at the door when he saw Simon leaning comfortably against the ledge, looking out over the city. He let the breath from his lungs in quiet relief, closed his eyes and shook his head fiercely a couple of times before he went calmly outside. With a smile he handed Simon a glass and then set his own on the light stone ledge. He scanned the dark horizon beyond the city. A strong, warm wind was like a billowing sheet of dry gauze against their faces. Dimly, heat lightening played low beneath the indistinct, boiling clouds.

«I believe it's about to rain,» he said.

«I believe you're right,» Simon agreed. «I hope so. The crops and the late grass need it. A good rain would help the farmer right now. Smells wonderful, doesn't it?»

«Wonderful.»

The first skeleton finger of lightning pointed trembling at the earth for a few seconds and vanished. Thunder rolled in and crashed somewhere behind them.

«I do believe it's raining over there already,» Simon said pointing.

Peter followed his direction. «So it is. It will be here in a few minutes.»

They both smiled at the prospect of summer rain and stood quietly watching the gray, rain curtain grow larger. A few large drops hit the ledge and gave off the faint odor of steam and damp stone.

«Simon?»

«Yes?»

«Simon, we've still tonight. Would you... Do you think... Is it asking too much?»

Slowly Simon turned his head to reply. He was smiling. In the faint light, his half illuminated face looked younger. The wind had uncombed his hair and his eyes seemed bright with an old times brightness. He straightened and held out his hands.

«No, Petey, it isn't too much. With you, nothing could ever be too much.»

And as they entered the room and closed the doors behind them, it commenced to rain.



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