

The three steps

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THE THREE STEPS

He never expected to see me at the station that evening. But travelling back I had missed a connection and knowing which train he would take to be back for work on Monday morning I decided to try my luck. Fond as I am of him I detected him a long way off in the crowd of passengers moving along the platform. As he had started his new job only a couple of weeks ago he was carrying heavy suitcases with his belongings to bring back to his new home.

«Hello, Boy.»

His face was worth painting at that moment. A painting called «Utter Surprise». But quickly that lovely grin of his suffused his features, he put his luggage down and we shook hands.

«What on earth brings you to this place?» were his first words.

«Well, I spent the weekend in Germany, missed my connection and thought I might as well try and meet you.»

«That's darned nice of you, and I'm glad to see you,» he said.

«Would you mind keeping me company for an hour in the waiting-room and see me off?» I asked.

«Not at all,» he said, but added with that quick perception he has, «You don't look very happy. Anything the matter?»

He knew about my friend's serious illness, so I told him the latest news. I was really glad to get it off my chest, I had felt terribly depressed on my journey back. After all, though my friend is married, we have been friends for a dozen years and his illness had been a great worry to me.

Boy (we never got out of the habit of calling him «Boy» though he is now in his late twenties) listened, full of sympathy, to this tale of woe. When I had finished he said in his simple engaging way, «I think it'll be much better for you to stay the night with me and return to work tomorrow morning.»

He took me by surprise. I had known him for nearly eighteen months, him and his friend. I liked them both very much. It wasn't my fault that I cared slightly more for Boy. I had met him on the very first evening I spent at the Club and — not knowing anything about him and his friend — had fallen for him that very night. But at that time he was working in the South, so our meetings were infrequent. However, I soon got to know Boy's friend as well, and had soon learned to like him, and in learning more and more about both of them had come to respect their friendship to the extent of suppressing my own feelings for Boy as best as I could. In the course of a year we had all three become good friends with a thorough liking for each other.

And now here was Boy, offering me hospitality for the first time by himself. I didn't exactly jump at this chance but I accepted it all the same.

We walked together to the street-car stop outside the station. Having no luggage I gave him a hand with his own. Boy must have felt some confusion himself, as I realized when some five minutes later he discov-

ered that we were waiting at the wrong stop. So we crossed over with a good laugh and boarded the right street-car. I had only been once before in this town and had no idea where we were bound for. Unexpectedly for me the street-car crossed the bridge spanning the large river. Overlooking the river, bathed in flood-light, stood the huge cathedral. It was a beautiful sight, doubly so as it had come upon me so suddenly.

The next stop was ours. We got off and Boy led me to his new home, of which he had told me so many details only the week before. He lived on the ground-floor of an old, perfectly shaped baroque house.

Suddenly I felt shy of entering Boy's world. I wasn't sure what prompted that shyness. The knowledge that I didn't «belong» here? Afraid of possible hurt? Fear of my own feelings which had come to the surface when I had stood next to the handsome Boy in the street-car?

When we entered his small apartment we stood in his tiny kitchen. Nice, clean and tidy, just as Boy is. But from that tiny kitchen three steps led down to his bed-sitting room. These three steps leading into Boy's own world enchanted me from the very first moment.

I went down and looked around that room, already comfortable though not yet finished. While I looked round he called from the kitchen above, «What about some beer?» When I agreed he went out once more to get beer nearby. While I was having a good wash I began to feel more at home. I had just about finished when he returned. The Midsummer night was very close, so I put on only the light jacket of my pyjamas with my shorts.

«I'm going to have a good wash myself,» Boy said, bringing the beer-bottles down into the room. He took off his jacket and shirt, and clad only in his undershirt and pants went back to the kitchen. It was the first time I had seen that lovely pair of shoulders. While he washed we talked. I was sitting relaxedly on his divan-bed.

When he had finished he stood at the top of those three steps, drying himself. He had taken off his undershirt. That was one of those moments never to be forgotten. The light fell on his proud bare torso — and I beheld all the glory of his young manhood.

When he came down he followed my example, took off his trousers and wore only the jacket of his pyjamas over his shorts. Now was apparently the time to introduce me to his most treasured possession — a brand-new high-fidelity set. I admired it and rightly so, and while we sat next to each other on his divan-bed, drank beer and talked, music from his LP's accompanied our talk. It got later and later but apparently he enjoyed our sitting so comfortably together. It was a good hour later that we decided to go to bed. Naturally it meant going together, as there was only one bed. So into it I climbed. The night-air was still suffocating though we had opened the windows behind the curtains. I covered myself with a thin linnen blanket only.

Boy set the alarm-clock and put on a last LP before he came in to me. He switched off the light above the bed and there was now only the glimmer from the set. While the record played itself out — it was Beethoven's First Symphony, that tender so un-Beethovenish symphony — we

talked in half tones. When it was over, Boy reached over and switched it off. —

The street lamps lighted the room dimly when Boy turned over to me and we kissed for the first time. I had kissed both boys frequently, in fact whenever we met, but this time it was different with Boy. I held that dark head between my hands and looked into Boy's tranquil eyes. I could scarcely believe it was going to happen.

Sleep came late to us. Finally Boy said, «Do you mind my putting my head on your shoulder? I like to sleep that way.» Did I mind! Sleep overtook him quickly but holding him close to me I stayed awake for quite some time in that state of utter relaxation and happiness brought about by a perfect mating. We both knew that each of us belonged to someone else but there was no feeling of guilt in either of us. A good friendship of long standing had found a satisfactory conclusion, and we both knew that we would remain friends.

The alarm-clock woke us only four hours later. We laughed when we realized in what a mixed state we were. Dog-tired on one side, relaxed and contented on the other.

My train left damnably early, so I had to leave bed and Boy quickly. While I washed, shaved and dressed, he went on drowsing in bed and only got up when I came down the three steps.

He drew me with a quick movement in his arms, smiled at me and said slowly and gently, «Well, life sometimes gives you lovely surprises, doesn't it?» He kissed me but I pushed him away. Not that I wanted to, but it was high time for him to get dressed. We were so late in fact that there was no time for me to have breakfast with him. He got ready quickly and we left the apartment. He was seeing me off at the street-car stop.

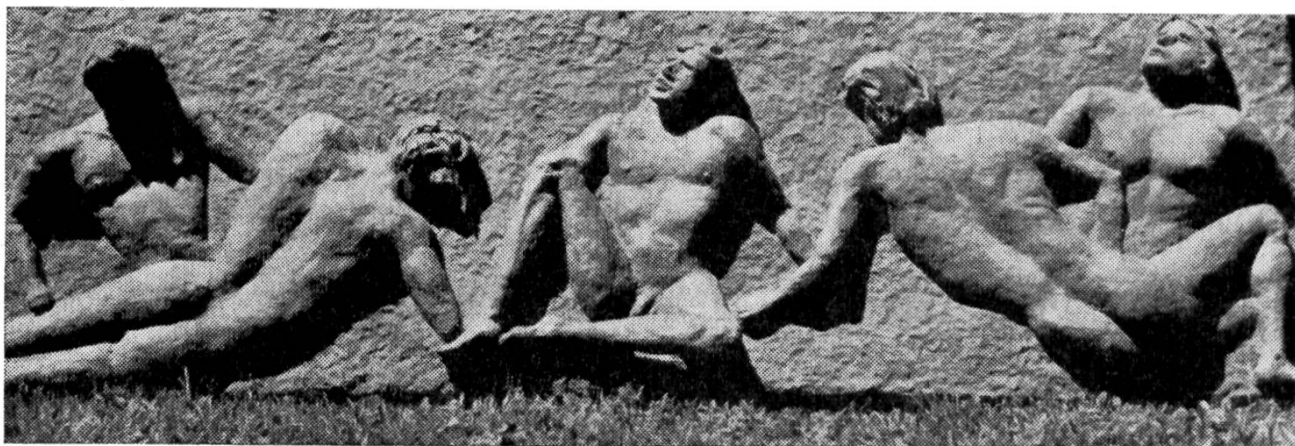
We shook hands. «We must both make our confessions this week,» Boy said. «Do you mind?»

«No, I don't,» I said, «I feel both will understand.»

The big river was full of barges when I crossed the bridge. High up in the early morning light stood the beautiful cathedral.

I left a different man from the one who had crossed the river last night.

Richard Arlen.



Relief

Kurt Stäheli, Porto Ronco

dach», sowie «Tea and Sympathy» (etwa Tee und Zuneigung) von Robert Anderson gezeigt. Beide Stücke, von denen «Die Katze auf dem heissen Blechdach» bereits auf mehreren deutschen Bühnen gespielt wurde, waren ebenfalls von der britischen Theaterzensur für die öffentliche Aufführung nicht freigegeben worden. AP.

Aus der «Frankfurter Rundschau» vom 11. Sept. 1956.

Dieses Stück wird dagegen in der Schweiz aufgeführt; es wird bereits in Luzern gespielt und auch das Schauspielhaus in Zürich bereitet eine Inszenierung vor. Unsere Kameraden werden sich diese Aufführungen sicher nicht entgehen lassen und den Theatern dadurch für ihren Mut danken. Der Kreis.

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