

The link

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THE LINK

He came out of the shower still wet, out of the small bathroom into the living-room, scattering diamonds as he walked, the water silver-beaded on his dark-skinned Greek body, his black hair plastered to his head, and he flicked me on the rump with the wet bath-towel, and it stung.

I hollered «Yoh!» and he laughed, throwing his head back. I looked at his broad chest and the wide fan of black hair on it, now wetted down and running in a heavy path down the center of his belly, to blossom again in the tangled growth of his groin. And I thought again, secretly and unbelievably, how lucky I was to be his room-mate—basketball star, big man on the campus, Apollo and Priapus all in one—my own, my very own Phil Andros. The hair darkening his legs, thick on thigh and calf, now clung to his skin from the shower almost as if he wore a pair of black tights, a dark sexual shadow of magic and mystery.

He towelled himself, still grinning and humming a little, while I sank into a chair at the desk and watched him, rough and tender beast that he was, rubbing fiercely at his armpits and pulling the towel like a shoe-shine cloth across his back, scrubbing furiously at his crotch to soak up the water where it gathered in his hair, and then drying first one leg and then the other. And the black hair, freed from the binding wetness, rose again in a faint dark shadowing, a dusky luminosity that softened the sturdy structure of his magnificent legs. Only a little of the hair wandered down on to his big naked feet—high-arched, and with the long and beautiful 'classical' toes that you usually find only on statues.

«What's on the program today, old bookworm?» he asked. He had flung himself naked on the sofa, one leg up and one foot on the floor, and was still flicking the towel dangerously in my direction.

«You're going with me at four o'clock to hear a lecture by Hamlin Garland,» I said.

«Who the hell is he?» he asked.

«A novelist. *Son of the Middle Border*. It'll be good for you. Very cultural.»

«Sounds more like a flower garden in a small town,» Phil said, laughing «You 'spose I can make him?»

«I doubt if you'd want to, Priapus,» I said. «He's over seventy, and has a beautiful mane of snow-white hair.»

Phil made a grimace. «Oedipus is so complex,» he said. «Why go then?»

I turned to face him. «Because,» I said, «he knew Walt Whitman, and after the lecture we will go up and shake his hand, and that way we can have a link with Whitman. We will have touched the hand that touched Whitman's and so we'll have a direct connection with the nineteenth century.»

Phil grinned. «Whatever you say, old cock,» he said. «I know it'll be good for me.»

I had never known anyone quite like Phil. He was the first 'well rounded man' of my acquaintance—the first to be as seriously interested

in the development of his intellect as he was of his muscles. He could quote a sonnet from Keats with the same facility that he could rattle off statistics on home-runs. He had a good sound mind in a good healthy body—the old classical ideal fulfilled, of *mens sana in corpore sano*.

Moreover, he was the first 'straight queer' I ever knew. That term requires a little explanation, I suppose. But what else could you call a guy, completely homosexual, who had everyone fooled, including most of the girls on the campus? Maybe even including himself. He was—or seemed to be—completely butch. He was on the varsity basketball team and the track team. He dated girls, he belonged to a fraternity, and he sat on the Student Senate—our self-governing body. He looked like a handsome 100% A—1 snatch-lovin' American boy (of Greek extraction); he smelled of shaving-lotion in the morning and sweat at night. There was not a single feminine mannerism in him at all. And man, he loved me!

In a way, this very maleness, this reputation he had, was the thing that had worked to my advantage. I cruised him one night in the library, and took him home with me. It's curious in our life how relationships usually begin with a wild sexual encounter, with the partners thereafter sometimes going on to become the best of friends. Usually, if you're hetero, you're friends first and lovers later. At any rate, we talked a lot that evening, afterwards, and evidently he saw in me the kind of protection he wanted. I had few of the giveaway mannerisms myself, and I was one of the intellectuals on the campus. Marie Anderson (a Lesbian) was 'my girl', my very darlin' red herring, and all the campus believed our marriage not far away.

Phil did not want to live in his fraternity house. The temptations were too much for him, so he told them that the noise and distractions kept him from studying, and moved in with me. And there you had it—an ideal arrangement, living with one of the campus idols, suspicion-free, with all the sex you could handle night and day. I did not call him Priapus for nothing; if I had not been around to take the pressure off, he would have exploded—and been ruined. As it was, I was the one in danger of being wrecked—twice a day, and sometimes more. And there was at least another year and a half of this heaven ahead. For this was April, the cruelest month, and both wonderful and sad—wonderful that it was unfolding us now and here, and sad—that it would not last forever.

It was fun even to walk across the campus with him. Everyone knew him, and I toasted myself in the glory reflected from him. A lot of persons knew me simply because I was with him, or was remembered as 'Phil's room-mate'. So it was a «Hi, Phil!» for him, and a smile and nod for me. I loved being his shadow, a close part of him. I would have liked to follow him through life like a little yellow dog.

The auditorium was small, cool on this sunny day, and full of the English department, assorted intellectuals, intense dilettantes, and just plain curiosity seekers. I am sure Phil was the only athlete there. He was certainly the handsomest male in the place.

We listened politely. There was no great message, no inspirational action-impelling exhortation. It was the pleasant October reminiscences of a somewhat diminished silver-haired giant as he remembered his youth

on the midwest plains. And afterwards we went up to shake his hand.

«And you really knew Walt Whitman, sir?» asked Phil.

«Yes,» said the patriarch. «I was very small, but once he shook my hand, and put his hand on my head. I remember his beard terrified me—»

Phil interrupted. «Did he put his left hand on your head, sir?»

Mr. Garland blinked. «Why, yes, he did,» he said. And then Phil—my irrepressible Phil—shocked all of his sophisticated audience standing around by saying,

«Would you mind a lot, sir, if I shook your hand and then put my other hand on your head the way Whitman did, sir? You see, sir, I'd like to establish a link with Whitman and the nineteenth century, sir, and you're the only one I can do it through.»

It's a great pity the photographer from the campus newspaper was not there to capture that incident. The campus buzzed with it for days. There stood Hamlin Garland, his magnificent old lion's head slightly bowed; and there was Phil Andros, star basketball player, resting his left hand on the old man's silver hair, while he vigorously shook his right hand. And then Phil knelt on one knee, and old Garland touched him on his head, much as a king would knight his faithful follower. And though they were both smiling, they were both as serious as if consecrating themselves in a search for the Holy Grail.

*

Some persons are so made that they can never belong to any other single person. There is in a sense too much of them; they are infinitely divisible, and everyone with whom they come in contact receives—either for treasuring or for careless discard—a small part of the donor, who is not thereby diminished, as one might suppose, but enlarged instead. Or it may be that they are like quicksilver, hard to hold in the hand, spilling and scattering and disappearing, and yet never seeming to vanish entirely. So it was with Phil. The only cloud in my life was that I did not own him entirely, and could never; perhaps I did not even want such a thing.

During the summer months Phil 'belonged' to a poetaster who lived in Atlantic City, an elderly phony of little talent but large desires named Bertrand Messer, who improbably enough had actually been elected 'Poet Laureate of New Jersey'. Phil had to spend his summers with this overripe fruit, who in turn sent Phil a considerable winter subsidy, filched from his wealthy wife's large income. There was nothing wrong with such an arrangement, and both Phil and I were glad for the money when it arrived on the fifth of each school month—but the summer separation was hard.

A couple of weeks after the Garland episode, Phil came into the apartment waving a letter. He was quite excited.

«Guess what ole Bertie's got cooked up for the summer!» he said.

«A delightful little idyll for two people on a small tropical island,» I said acidly.

«Nah . . . really, listen.» He opened the sheet of paper and read: «'I know you have always wanted to go to Europe, dear boy, and this seems

to be the time. You will have to go ahead of me—by ship if you want to—and I will fly over to meet you in, say, Paris. I can be gone only three weeks without Helen getting suspicious. And then you may have the rest of the summer to spend on the continent if you want. But you must promise, of course, to be faithful to me'»

I could almost hear Bertie's high nasal tones simpering with his corrupted bitch's accent through the last sentence. «Ugh,» I said aloud.

Phil doubled his fist and hit me on the shoulder. «You're just jealous,» he said. «How's about that? Ain't that sumpin? Man, I'm finally gonna make it to Yurp!» And with a sudden access of exuberance, he did a large cartwheel in the middle of the living room. It startled the hell out of me. When he came down his feet knocked over a small table, but luckily broke nothing.

«Goddlemighty,» I said, picking up the table. Phil looked up from the floor.

«Sure as hell wish you could go along, ole buddy,» he said.

«Well, that's the breaks,» I said. At the moment I could have with delight buried a meat cleaver in the peanut brain of Bertie Messer.

Phil got up from the floor. «I'm gonna miss you, ole buddy,» he said. And he threw his arm around my shoulder, put his open hand at the back of my head, and turned my face so that I was directly looking at him. That close, his eyes looked enormous—velvety black, deep. He kissed me hard, biting at my lower lip, and then—dropping the letter—pulled me over to the sofa, where for the next half hour we forgot about Bertie and Europe and the sociology exam scheduled for the next day . . . and I—at least temporarily—no longer knew what it was like to be jealous.

It was some time along towards the end of May, I think, that the idea came to us. The campus had never really forgotten about the Garland episode, largely because one of the would-be journalists on the campus newspaper had written a little essay about the 'new athletic mysticism'—a most unfortunate wording which confused everyone—that a certain basketball player was engaged in developing; and the writer had gone on in a kind of wandering pseudo-intellectual imbecility to draw comparisons with St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila and some others. One sentence annoyed the hell out of Phil. It was: 'Here is a man, ostensibly, trying to reestablish the deep spiritual ties of our troubled times with the calmer era of the earlier Victorians'. The thing that annoyed Phil, and made me chuckle, was the unnecessary and incorrect comma after 'ostensibly'.

«I don't like it a damn bit!» he raged, throwing the *Lantern* on the floor. «'Here is a man—ostensibly!' It sounds as if I wasn't a man. I'll break that bastard's neck!»

«Simmer down,» I said. «You know the paper is fulla errors. This is just another one.» And he gradually forgot about it, although a new nickname for him arose. It was now «Hiya, Mystic!» when we crossed the campus, and I found the whole thing very funny.

I suppose the nickname kept the episode in our minds. At any rate, one evening over coffee Phil said—evidently remembering that someone had called him 'Mystic' just that day—«If we really are gonna be mystics,

we ought to be able to get a better connection than just a pat on the head and a handshake from Walt Whitman.»

«Yeah,» I said, «that's not very intimate. It doesn't mean a heluva lot.»

Suddenly there was a light in Phil's eye, and he set the cup down carefully. «Hey,» he said. «Tell me if I'm wrong, but isn't Oscar's boyfriend still alive? Lord what's-his-name?»

I hastily consulted the permanent file of obituaries of literary figures that I kept in my head. «Sure,» I said, «unless he died last week and it hasn't been entered yet.»

Phil whacked his fist into his palm. «That's it!» he said. «If they're gonna call me mystic, I'm gonna have something to be mystical about. I reckon you couldn't get any closer in the nineteenth century to what interests us than to go bed with the same boy Oscar did.»

I shook my head slowly, negatively. «No longer a boy,» I said.

«How old would he be by now?» said Phil.

I did some addition in my head. «About seventy-five or six,» I said. It rocked Phil a little. He looked dubious. «Gee,» he said.

«A real sacrifice, man,» I said. «Are you strong enough to lay yourself on the altar of the new athletic mysticism? And let someone plunge the knife deep in your heart?»

Phil cracked his knuckles. «I don't reckon there'd be much plungin' going on,» he said. «But—sheez, seventy-five!»

«Or six,» I added. «Or seven or eight. Tell me, Philly,» I said, knowing that calling him that always made him squirm, «are you a gerontophile?»

«What the hell's that?»

«One who loves old people,» I said. «Do you see in this peer of England your father-image? If you do, does not the whole thing become a bit incestuous?»

Phil looked narrowly at me. «Nah,» he said. «And knock it off, before I gag you with this.» He gestured.

«I'm scared to death.»

Phil went on thinking. «It ain't the father-image angle at all,» he said. «I'd just be using him to reach back to Oscar. You know—where Oscar was, I'd be. Or vice-versa.»

«As I remember,» I said, «I think you'd have a hard time. At first he defended poor Oscar quite violently, but then he got religion when he was about forty, and turned against all such sins of the flesh.»

Phil looked down at his arm. He had on a skin-tight nylon tee-shirt, black and shortsleeved. His elbows were resting on his knees, his hands clasped, as he leaned forward talking to me. And instead of replying, he merely unclasped his hands and slowly pulled the right arm upwards, resting his elbow as a fulcrum on his right knee. The thirty-six well-formed muscles of his arm and shoulder sprang into life, and—fascinated—I watched the pattern of their movement and progress, as they took their cues like well-trained actors from the prompter's box of his brain. He raised and lowered the arm once, twice, three times—and then with a half-smile looked up at me with his dark eyes half hidden under their lustrous long black lashes, and grinned.

«Well, ole buddy,» he said, «I'll try—I'll try my damndest to get him to slip just once. You never quite stop being one,» he said, «once you are one, you know.»

It has always been, I suppose, the young who seduce the old.

*

It was a long hard summer. I worked in the library, in charge of the graduate seminar rooms on the top floor, chasing away the stray undergraduates who tried to slip up there on Friday nights to make love. For the most part I succeeded, although now and then the janitor picked up a discarded messy something or other from the back steps, and came storming upstairs to accuse me of dereliction of duty.

In all those three months, there were only four postcards from Phil. He was never one to write letters. Two of them were postmarked from Hove, Sussex. The first one had on it: 'A bull of a man. Where is the rose-lipt youth, the Venetian glass nephew? Ugh. But anyway he said, «Call me Bosie.»'

The second one was postmarked the day after the first. It said: 'Mission accomplished. A & P did all that A & O did. Maybe more. On to Paris and Bertie.'

The third, arriving from Paris during the middle of August, said: 'Am staying at the Hôtel d'Alsace in the rue des Beaux Arts, in the very room where O. died. Bertie disapproving of my mystique.'

The final one arrived just a couple of weeks before Phil did. On it was: 'Saw O's grave in Père Lachaise cemetery. Bringing you a souvenir. Will be back shortly to link you in.」

It is often very odd how a simple phrase can shake one emotionally. For the next two weeks I fed erotically on the last sentence of his postcard, drawing fantasy after fantasy from it, and wasting a good deal of my substance over it. It sounded almost as if Phil had developed the thing into a real ritual—that we would have to approach the rite clothed in white samite—'mystic, wonderful'—after purification fasts and prayers, and that there might indeed be a sacrificial altar and a sacred knife.

And I waited impatiently, for he was the sort of person who would suddenly appear at the doorway without a warning word of the moment of his arrival.

It was a hot and sultry night around the middle of September. There was hardly a breeze stirring the curtains of the window of our living-room, but far away in the west I heard the dim mutterings of summer thunder. I had the electric fan turned on, but it was not cooling; it merely shifted the heated and humid air around into a different place. I was nearly naked, except for my shorts, on the sofa. Once in a while a faint crackle sounded on the low-tuned radio—summer lightning, somewhere far.

I had been reading a novel—Gide or Cocteau—and I must have dozed a little, because I wakened suddenly with a great start as something brushed against my lips. I looked up, and it was Phil, laughing. He leaned over and kissed me—and then, seeking my hand, yanked me to my feet. Without a word, still smiling, he led me to the bedroom—and there, for an hour, he proved that journeys end in lovers meeting.

When it was over, I lay there sore and exhausted in the dark, wondering what to say to him. Such a demand as 'Now tell me all about your trip,' does nothing save freeze the mind of the traveller, for he does not know where to begin. It must all come out by littles—over morning coffee, or dinner, or as a sudden punctuation to one's shaving. Finally I asked a comparatively uncomplicated question:

«Are you glad to be back?»

Phil yawned, and stretched lazily. «Well, yes and no,» he said. «Yes—to get back to see you; no, because there's a hard year ahead, and no, because it was really fun in Europe.» He stretched one handsome leg up towards the ceiling, curving the toes down, and then let it fall back on the bed.

«Well, tell me about the new athletic mysticism.»

He laughed and sprang from the bed. He went into the living-room and rummaged in one of the bags that he had set down near the door. His kneeling was a poem, each movement unconsciously graceful. He found what he was looking for and brought them back to the bedroom, one wax-paper wrapped object in each hand.

He tossed one to me. «What is it?» I said, unwrapping the crumpled paper. He unwrapped his own.

They were two ceramic roses, of a rather hideous purple-red shade edged in lighter pink, and set on a wire stem. I must have looked a little disturbed. He laughed again.

«They were part of a bouquet of six laid on Oscar's tomb in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris. I knew how their color would have offended him, so I lessened his uneasiness a little by taking some of them away.»

«Should have thrown the others in the garbage,» I said. I looked at it. Well, it was a souvenir. «And . . . er . . . Bosie?» I asked.

Phil bounced himself back on the bed. «Funny thing,» he said, staring at the ceiling. «I thought from those early pictures he'd be a sissy type. Nah, he wasn't. He was quite an athlete as a young man—won some open running events both at Winchester and Magdalen. And as an . . . old man, he was really kinda like the cartoons of John Bull. And still quite lively.»

«Well,» I said, «am I . . . linked to the nineteenth century?»

Phil chuckled. «Not yet, actually,» he said.

I was somewhat surprised. «But . . . but we've done everything in the book,» I protested. «We must have covered it somewhere along the way.»

«You may find this hard to believe,» Phil said, «but it's straight from the source. And don't tell me he was lying, because he admitted a lot of other things, freely. But it seems that Oscar idolized him, in an almost pure platonic way . . . They were both club members, yes—but they liked different types, and what they did was get boys for each other, plus . . .»

«But all those damned letters he wrote to Bosie!» I interrupted.

«Just the sort of literary thing he'd do.»

I was almost speechless. «B-but,» I spluttered, «you said 'almost' a platonic affection. Why not entirely?»

Phil was amused again. «Well, there were certain schoolboy familiarities between them . . . Here, I'll show you.» He took my hand and laid it on himself and put one of his hands on me, and then raising a little, leaned over and kissed me.

I jerked away from him and rolled over on the bed. He was laughing uproariously, and I was outraged. «You mean to say that all those trials were just over that?»

Phil was some time in subsiding with his laughter. «N-no,» he said weakly. «Bosie was never on trial at all. You couldn't very well call those schoolboy pastimes a criminal offense. With all the other young men they had, it was the gen-you-wine thing, for both of them. But they were real tender together, man,» and he went on laughing.

«So . . . he linked you in after you explained,» I said.

«Yeah,» and then Phil stopped laughing and said, «but I gotta tell you, you and I weren't the first that thought of such a thing. Happens all the time. Young queers get curious and write to Bosie from all over—America, France, Italy, Denmark—and ask to visit him. He knows what they want. So without any trouble at all, he's got a steady stream of tricks pouring in his door. Pretty neat, huh?»

«And they all get linked like that?»

«Well,» said Phil. «That's part of the secret. 'Each man gets the thing he loves'—and Phil went on for two more lines in his ribald paraphrase of the quotation.

«Well, Mystic,» I said, «I suppose you'll devote the rest of your life to linking in all the pretty young twentieth century things with the nineteenth century.»

Phil turned to me and put his arm around my waist and nibbled my ear. «That's for later, man,» he said. «That's for year after next.»

«And what's for now?» I asked.

«This,» said Phil, «a different link. A link in the 'golden chain of rose-tinted Aphrodite'.»

«Hmm,» I said, struggling, but not very much. «In Shakespeare's day they called it playing at two-backed beast.»

Outside there was a stab of lightning, and then, finally, it started to rain.

—Ward Stames

A FORMER SUBSCRIBER WRITES:

«I have decided not to renew my membership. I do this not because of dissatisfaction with The Circle—which has always been, and is, excellent—but for personal reasons. I passed my 75th birthday last September. This seemed as good an occasion as any to stop deluding myself with matters which, at least when initiated, belong to youth.»

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