

One splendid moment

Autor(en): **Haris, Marsh**

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«Because you needed it,» I said. — «Is that the only reason?»

«No. You also needed love,» I confessed. — «Do you love me?» he persisted.

«The day before yesterday . . . tenderly, as one loves a lost child. After last night and today . . . hungrily as a *found* man.»

Then it came pouring out . . . all the hurt and bewilderment, the rejection by his family, the dazed terror of being unwanted in a jeering world, the wild fear of identification as a homosexual. He was convinced he *looked* and *acted* like a homosexual, and would never be able to find employment after he had received his University Degree. «You,» he sighed in conclusion, «are the only person who has accepted me for what I am.»

«Nonsense!» I said brutally. «I didn't accept you because I thought you were homosexual. I never dreamed you were. You don't look or act as though you are. *Believe* me, I *know!* I pestered you with my notes in the bathroom because you needed someone. Just as I did . . . and do!»

«*You need me?*» he whispered in wonder.

«And don't give me the father image routine!» I muttered. «I'm only about six years older than you are. Well? Where are all the kisses you owe me for nights spent in nothing but chaste sleep on my savage breast?»

He paid in full and opened a charge account. Usurer that I am, I see that he pays daily. It is he who insists on the added interest paid in the transactions of love.

One Splendid Moment

For R. B.

by MARSH HARIS

Two men of middle years sat across the living room from one another as the waning afternoon sun cast broad, angular shafts of light through the open Venetian blinds.

«What would you say,» asked one, «out of your entire life, would be your finest moment, one splendid moment that set all others apart, one single moment that made all others pale in comparison? Can you tell me that?»

«Out of my entire life?» the other considered, intrigued by such a question. «That is a great many moments, you know. After all, I'm nearly fifty-seven. By some standards I'm old; I am an old man. And you ask me to pick from fifty-seven years a single moment?»

«I do. But of course I can't really expect an answer, can I. I doubt that any man could answer that question.»

«Then, my dear Philip, I am going to surprise you; I am going to astonish you. I am going to answer your question. And furthermore, I am going to demand that you believe my answer. True, I am amazed at your asking such a question, but believe me, there is no doubt whatever in my mind as to its answer. I can be so sure simply because it happens there *is* such a moment in my life, one so extraordinary, so inexpressibly beautiful, that it stands towering over all the other moments of my life like the Great Pyramid of Gizeh high above the soil of Egypt. It has no comparison.»

«Three years ago I visited America. I was tired; I needed the holiday. And so I decided to come spend a couple of weeks with some dear old friends of mine who were then living in Washington, D. C. They welcomed me, with the one stipulation that I come absolutely for the rest not tramp all over the city like a tourist. Well, I agreed to this, knowing full well it was for my own benefit.»

«I had been there precisely four days when one evening a particular friend of theirs dropped in. I say 'dropped in', for as far as they were concerned that

was all it amounted to. But for me it was more like he had 'descended' from heaven. I was introduced to Ron. Miracle of miracles, Ron had come into my life.

«Philip, he was more exquisite than you can possibly imagine. Can you picture a glorious lad of twenty-three, blond, firmly built, skin the colour of dull gold, flashing, almost violet eyes, and lips as red as a child's who had just eaten a cherry lollipop. Philip, he was unearthly beautiful, and of a nature so gentle it would have done the angels honour. My very senses were challenged; I could not believe what stood before me.

«We talked; we became friends. I told him about my own country and he told me about Washington. I told him about my work and he told me about his. Can you imagine, Philip, this magnificent young Ganymede was a mere carpenter's helper! Oh, I thought to myself, I have always known that the play is badly cast, but this is the most egregious blunder of them all.

«Late that evening, when he had gone and I lay alone in my bed, forgive me if I sound melodramatic when I say my poor heart nearly cracked into a thousand pieces. This above all else was the curse of growing old. If only my eyes had weakened along with my years that I could not have looked upon that young god-thing. It was not fair that the aged be forced to see and desire—and be so cruelly denied.

«The simple fact was that I loved the boy. I loved him beyond the very concept of love itself. Within him lay my heaven, my utopia, my paradise. I never knew desire could be so great, or that worship so awesomely intense. Our language has no word for what I felt. All I can say is that it altered my very breath, the very beating of my heart. It consumed my soul and toyed playfully with my insides.

«How ironic that I had come for rest and found myself forced to endure the greatest torture of my life. Morpheus abandoned me; my very senses had been raped. I was no longer myself, but a thing transfixed with pain and desire. Oh, I tell you, Philip, had I been put upon the rack and stretched until my fibres split I would not have suffered more.

«But can you imagine my joy when the very next day my beloved Ron visited again. Lucky for me there was some kind of holiday for him and apparently for lack of something interesting to do he came to see me. I say 'me' because he was not at all unaware that our mutual friends both were away at their jobs and that I would be alone. And so all day long we sat across the room from one another and talked. I made him coffee in the morning when he came, and then at noon I fixed him lunch. For a time we played records, since, much to my delight, I found his musical taste quite similar to my own.

«And all during the while I gorged myself with the pleasure of merely looking at him. My eyes caught him greedily at every angle and took in his image like some all-consuming camera. With my eyes I undressed him; with my eyes I put him in every conceivable position;—with my eyes I made love to him. And I was not ashamed. This I knew would be the only way I would ever make love to him and I took it like a hungry child feeding upon its mother's breast.

«He was kind to me. He smiled his bright smile at me. He paid me little compliments. He listened carefully to all I had to say. And he asked me questions about myself. Think of it, Philip, he cared enough to ask questions! Oh, I worshipped the very sound of every word he uttered. It was a day I shall not forget so long as I possess my senses.

«Then shortly before my friends returned that evening, Ron left me. And to their great amazement and indeed amusement my friends found me in the most ridiculously high spirits. And it was thus that the evening passed until late in the night as I lay awake reliving the precious few hours that had just made up so wondrous a day. Then once again the agony returned.

«And yet so did Ron. The following evening, in fact. The four of us took in a film, and to my unimaginable joy I was allowed to sit so closely beside him for nearly two hours. It was really at that time, I think, that the most fearful combination of emotions took possession of me. I had seen him now for three straight days and found myself in an absolute glow of happiness. And yet this only served to speed my days along, thus bringing my time of departure for home nearer and nearer. It was at once wonderful and monstrous.

«And so with a great volition I forced myself to enjoy my days and put entirely out of my mind the pain of having to leave—until I had reached the very eve of that dreaded day. But think, Philip, I had been with him *every single day* since meeting him! It was not, I confess, more than I'd have asked, but vastly more than I could have ever expected. I had been given more in those few days than all my life before could boast. I had been with my Ron; I had seen his lovely face and body (fully clothed that it was); I had heard his precious voice. That was all there had been, and yet it had been an inconceivable lot to me.

«I was to take an afternoon flight, and so I made arrangements for Ron and I to have a noon lunch downtown alone together. We sat across a square table from one another in a small, quiet restaurant.

«'Ron, I am going to do a cowardly thing,' I said to him, 'a thing that most people would consider completely unethical. But I cannot help myself; for the rest of my life I would be tormented if I did not do it.' The poor boy sat staring oddly at me, having forgotten to eat altogether. 'Quite by accident I met you. And from then on not a day passed that I did not see you. I drained from you every possible pleasure that your nearness could give. All the while you were so innocent, so unknowing, while I, a lecherous old man, was feasting upon your youth, your strong, manly youth. And now that I am going away and shall never see you again I am telling you all this. I shall not have to face the consequences. I am a criminal who knows full well he shall not have to answer for his crime. All these days, my dear Ron, I have been loving you incredibly, the old man completely overwhelmed by the lovely youth who made the mistake of being kind to him. There, you see, I do not deceive myself. I am old, I know that, I am soft and spreading and wrinkled. I am old and ugly. But you must try to understand and forgive me; I still *feel*, I still *see!* Desire, I'm afraid, does not always age with the body. And so I have not been able to control myself; I have worshipped you. And as I sit here this very moment I still do, while in the same breath I beg to be forgiven for having said obscene, disgusting things to you. Forgive me that, and understand why I have said them.'

«And now, Philip, for the answer to your question. You want to know what single moment of my life shines bright above all the others? Then I shall tell you. That beautiful, god-like young man sitting before me did not lower his head, he did not look away, but gazed at me, indeed *into* me, for a long bewildering time, then spoke at last,—and I had my one splendid moment of a lifetime.

«'But don't you see,' he said in a voice slowly flooding with pain, '*I have loved you all the while*. What could I possibly care about how old you are? And what has ever given you the idea that to be loved you must be slim, or 'tightly muscled, or the age I am? Why shouldn't I love you because you are *you*, because you are kind, and wise, and because I am so overjoyed with the realisation that you love me that I want to return that love? I love you for loving me. I love you for all these reasons and more. I don't know why I love you—but I know that I do. Oh please, please don't go; don't take your plane! Stay here with me; stay and let me love you.'

«And so I did.

«Now, my dear Philip, does that answer your question?»

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