

"Tricks"

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„TRICKS“

by

Richard Arlen

*To my friend and
collaborator L. A.*

Tricks entered my life in August, though not in the flesh. After much urging I had persuaded Hugh, my photographer-friend, to show me his private collection of male figure studies he has made. But when, in the midst of that ocean of photographs, I came across a set of prints of a certain young man, my interest in all the others waned swiftly. I don't know why I fell for that unknown chap so suddenly. It was chiefly his eyes, I think. Of course, he had a slightly up-turned nose which gave a boyish irregularity to his handsome features, and I've always liked up-turned noses. His body was mature, full-formed, with a mat of black hair on his broad chest. His sturdy legs were also dark with hair. I prefer a smooth body, really, but there was something powerfully attractive in that husky, virile form. Yet the most moving thing about him were his eyes, dark and liquid. I sensed veiled passion in their depths. In some of the photographs those eyes possessed a sort of intense awareness as they looked out at me, something electrically alert which struck a responding spark in me. Well, I fell for him heels over head, that's all.

Yes, it was Tricks. I asked Hugh to explain the old nickname. He said that someone had once jokingly called him «a bag of tricks» and the name had stuck. Hugh went on to tell me more about him, that he had a steady job in a town nearby, that he was, all in all, a decent fellow, though unpredictable in his social habits, sometimes showing up twice a week, sometimes not appearing for months. Before I left his house that evening Hugh generously gave me those photographs which had stirred me so and also promised to introduce me to their subject the next time he showed up. But in the months that followed he became a kind of standing joke between Hugh and me. I kept accusing Hugh of monopolising Tricks and pretended never to believe his earnest denials.

Then one evening in the middle of November the telephone rang just as I was leaving the office. It was Hugh. Tricks was with him. Would it be convenient if he brought him to my flat? Would it be convenient!

I hurried home, buying a bottle of Vermouth and some delicacies on the way. I built up a good fire and when it was burning cheerfully I sat down to wait, amused to notice that my heart was pounding fast, aware of the absurdity of an infatuation based on a set of photographs but enjoying the situation just the same, although wondering whether, after all, Hugh's camera hadn't lied, particularly about the promise of those eyes. But soon my guests arrived. It was distinctly odd meeting Tricks for the first time. The pictures Hugh had given me had become the focus of my dreams. For months the image of Tricks had been at the center of my private life. And now it was as if my dream had

materialized and there was something magical in that, yet the dream was wearing a conventional striped suit and responded to the conventional introduction in the conventional way. Well, we all had a couple of Vermouths and talked comfortably *à trois* until Hugh told us he had another appointment and took his leave. It was even odder being alone with Tricks, there in the flat where I had pored over his naked image so many nights alone, aware that he knew I had those photographs and loved them, wondering if he had any inkling of what they meant to me, a little embarrassed to think he might understand but even more strongly hoping that he did. For his part, Tricks encouraged my hopes by the unreserved ease of his conversation, as if we had known each other for years. He looked thirty but I discovered to my surprise that he was only twenty-four. However, he had lived a rather adventurous life. He told me that a couple of years previously he had almost joined the French Foreign Legion. He had gotten as far as Marseilles but in the barracks there he and some others had attacked a sergeant after which he had been duly thrown into prison, although he managed to escape with the help of a compatriot. It made an exciting story but I hardly needed the additional stimulant. Besides, I was already labouring to overcome my habitual shyness with attractive strangers, was envying Tricks' perfect ease, while at the same time cursing my own timidity. The conversation shifted to books and when I arose to fetch a volume Tricks had expressed a desire to see and then found myself standing close beside his chair, it cost me a great, absurd effort of will to raise my hand and to caress his black, curly hair. But instead of the cold rebuff I had been dreading Tricks tilted back his head and smiled at me with frank enjoyment. However, since I really wanted to know him, we went on talking for a long time after that, sipping the excellent Vermouth and smoking innumerable cigarettes. It was pretty late when Tricks finally said, «Well, how about bed?» So to bed we went.

I awoke the next morning feeling as if I had bathed in the Fountain of Youth. I was purged, cleansed, renewed. Tricks had to catch a train at an ungodly hour in order to be on time for work. I let him sleep as long as possible while I arose, shaved, washed and prepared breakfast. He came to the table clad only in his pyjama trousers, and while he ate heartily, my own breakfast consisted of black coffee, cigarettes and the sight of that broad, black-matted chest of his, which seemed quite nourishing fare to one who is, after all, a rather lonely man.

We left the house in that hour which hovers between darkness and daybreak to find the season's first snow had fallen during the night. In the strange half-light the whitened world had lost all reality. As in a dream I linked my arm with Tricks and we soundlessly descended the ninety-nine steps leading from my cul-de-sac to street-level, and though we moved steadily downward I felt as though I were ascending to heaven. I accompanied Tricks to the station and saw him off.

And that's how it went the first time.

Hugh had told me that Tricks never replied to letters, but I wrote to him all the same. Well, Hugh was right. But partly because the satisfaction of that first meeting kept me glowing for a long time, partly

because Hugh's warning made me realize that I had no reason to take Tricks' silence as a personal slight since he never wrote letters to anyone else either, I was not hurt by his silence, not even much disappointed. Well, November passed and December came. I went home for Christmas. From there I wrote Tricks again, telling him that my birthday fell on the first Saturday in January and inviting him to spend the weekend with me. Perhaps at my age one ought not to celebrate birthdays any more. But it is always nice to have a celebration even though there's nothing much to celebrate.

Somewhat to my surprise Tricks did arrive that first Saturday in January; rather early too, so that we had plenty of time for plenty of celebration. I had had misgivings about that second meeting even as I sought it, as a second meeting is often quite different from the first. My birthday party with Tricks *was* different: Tricks is essentially a man of action and he seemed to feel that in November we had made enough conversation to last us for quite some time. We had quite a varied evening, helped along by gin and Vermouth and jazz records. (It disturbed me slightly that Tricks seemed to like the bottle a bit too much.) I even took some photographs of my new friend's shaggy nudity, my very first attempt at that sort of thing. My camera is quite an old one and I had only my reading lamp for lighting, so that Tricks had to hold the pose for fifteen seconds each time the shutter clicked. But he proved to have as marvellous a capacity for immobility as for vigorous action, and to my astonishment the whole set of photographs turned out very well. I congratulate myself for having foresight enough to think of the lean times in the day of plenty.

Perhaps the great love of my life has been, not a fellow human at all, but the enchanting music of Mozart. But there was no Mozart at my birthday party. Only the extravagance, the primitivism and the improvisation of jazz suited the occasion. We made a crazy, real gone night of it, Tricks and I.

It was eleven on Sunday morning when we awoke. After I relighted the fire and it was burning merrily I crawled back into bed where we loafed until noon, Tricks finishing a thriller he had brought with him. We had a huge breakfast at noon and afterwards went to see «Carmen Jones», the fifth time for me — I am a Belafonte fan — but Tricks' first. After the show we parted, Tricks to go to see his married brother here in town, I home to bed. I fell asleep knowing that I hadn't been so happy and relaxed for years. It seemed incredible that a man as young and attractive as Tricks could have found so much pleasure in my company, for I am definitely middle-aged, and although I do not have a protruding belly there isn't much hair left on my head, alas! How fortunate that there are young people in the world for whom the esthetic factor is not the decisive one!

My front windows are at street level. Around midnight I was roused from a deep and dreamless sleep by repeated knocks on my window pane. To my astonishment it proved to be Tricks once again. I let him in and climbed back into bed, while he seated himself on its edge to talk to me. His breath and his slurred speech made it plain that he had too

much to drink, though his good manners did not desert him. He had repeatedly tried to see his brother, but with no success, and in the end missed his last train. It all sounded as if it were quite true, but less than the whole truth.

I asked Tricks if anything was troubling him, if he had something on his mind. I had to repeat my question and even then he replied with an uneasy question of his own. «Didn't Hugh tell you about me?»

«Not much, really. Nothing to your discredit, if that's what you mean. Every time he spoke of you he told me what a nice fellow you are. What else could he have told me about you?»

There was a small unhappy silence. «I wish he had told you.»

«Told me what, Tricks? Come now, you might as well get it off your chest, if you really think I ought to know.»

«I was sure he had told you. I don't get it. He *must* have told you.»

I began to wonder what secret Tricks had been concealing, with Hugh's complicity. «Well, he didn't. And here you sit. If you want me to know this thing why don't you stop beating around the bush and just come out with it?»

«Didn't Hugh tell you that I'm not really like you? It's mostly sort of a — well — a side-line with me, if you know what I mean. Well, I mean I like women. As a matter of fact I go with several girls. There've been quite a few women in my life. Of course, I've gone around with quite a few men as well. Though I won't deny that I enjoy it with them, it was the women I really cared about. The men were, well, you know how it is . . . with the men it was mostly a sort of a business proposition. You know what I mean? Oh, I've doing it a long time. I was sure Hugh must have told you this, because when he talked to me about you he said I'd be able to get something out of you.» Now that he had come into the open with the brutal truth his hesitancy vanished and he continued fluently enough. He needed money badly. He was in a fairly serious financial jam. That had been his reason for accepting my invitation for the weekend.

I listened to him in silence. There wasn't much for me to say.

«But it's funny,» Tricks continued. «I had such a good time that first night I stayed here I couldn't ask you for anything.» Now he was hesitant again, but still I kept silent. «And this weekend it was even stranger,» he went on. «Being in such a beastly fix I made up my mind I just had to ask you for money this time. But, damn it, you were so glad to see me. And you acted like you were really fond of me. And you did so many little things to make me feel at home. Like I was important. Like I really meant something to you. You're such a decent man and you treated me so decently. Damn it, I just couldn't bring myself to ask you for the money.»

«Therefore you got tipsy to screw up enough courage?»

«That's right.»

Then we got down to brass tacks and he told me at length about the predicament he was in. He needed a rather sizeable sum of money and much as I would have liked to help him I was simply unable to do so. By chance we had discussed our respective incomes the day before

and he knew my own financial position, which at its best is not a very good one. In spite of being depressed and worried and still a little drunk Tricks understood. We talked his problem back and forth and although we did not discover any practical solution for it, in the end I still respected Tricks and he still respected me. Finally he said, «What the hell! We aren't getting anywhere. What does it matter anyway?»

«What you need right now is sleep. You'd better take the guest room tonight.»

So off he went to bed, dog-tired, in the small adjacent room.

I lay awake most of the night wrestling wearily with my confused thoughts and feelings. But when I got Tricks up in the morning, again at an ungodly hour, he seemed to have left all his cares behind — such is the resilience of youth. He came to breakfast wearing only his shirt, his sturdy legs bare, and obviously in an out-going frame of mind. Being still in the grip of mixed emotions regarding him I did not take advantage of the unspoken invitation but instead sat him down to the table immediately. He enjoyed his breakfast very much. He isn't keen on tendernesses with a man (it is another story with his girl-friends, I suspect) but that morning he was surprisingly tender with me, perhaps he wanted to sweeten the bitter flavour left by the revelation of the night before. We lingered long over breakfast in a mood of affectionate companionship. He waited until the very last minute to dress and dash for his train.

And that's how it was the second time.

And since then? Tricks hasn't been back again but I feel fairly sure he'll return. I've thought about the situation frequently enough. I must admit that I regret my fall from the sentimental heaven I formerly inhabited. But the most painful thing was to be caught between my sincere liking for Tricks and the probable necessity of having to pay him for «services rendered» in the future. But after all, there is one advantage in having reached a mature age, one can view life's difficulties with a certain balance, one can maintain a certain sense of proportion which is difficult if not impossible for youth. In short, my relationship with Tricks doesn't really matter crucially one way or the other. With him or without him life will go on pretty much the same. I am on cordial terms with my barber and my doctor, both of whom minister to my bodily needs for a certain price. I do not begrudge them their fees. Tricks pursues his sideline of his own free choice. There can be no question but that he loves his work and is highly competent in it. As long as he remains an *honest* businessman how can I reproach him? With him, at least, I know just where I stand. I believe that Tricks' affection for me is genuine. If it mystified me that a man so young and handsome should have enjoyed himself so much with me, Tricks again and again expressed his own mystification that a man of my maturity and culture should be interested in him, should like him, be fond of him. What in myself I find commonplace seems somewhat glamorous to him, and what I find glamorous in him is commonplace to Tricks. It all tidies up quite nicely, I believe. As for his women, while I think wist-

fully of his generosity to them, on the other hand it is not displeasing to receive the occasional favours of one so irresistible to the other sex.

The other day I earned some unexpected money doing a couple of translations. Part of that money I spent on an expensive ticket for a concert-performance of Mozart's *Idomeneo* — it could not have been spent better! The other half is still intact, so I shall write Tricks a letter inviting him for a weekend. That money will be well-spent too.

A New Beginning

by Seaweed.

The six o'clock whistle had sounded more than an hour ago in the large construction camp, bringing the day's work to a close; at least for most of the workers on this Air Force Base. But not so for Ron who, as an engineer, often found it necessary to work overtime.

The bare office in which he sat was now silent, Ron the only occupant. For the last ten minutes or so he had been motionless and pensive, his slim figure sprawled in a swivel chair under the fluorescent light which, stark though it was, gave his light brown, crew-cut hair a healthy sheen. Ron was a likeable, even attractive thirty-five, but tonight he was tired, and with nightfall and fatigue came loneliness. His work was finished now, but he lingered, listlessly, surrendering to the meager comfort of his reveries. Months of the impersonal life at the big, bare, isolated camp was making him a kid again, feeding on fantasies.

«A penny for your thoughts.»

Ron looked up, startled. Standing above him was one of the Army Engineers who had recently arrived at the base. He managed a wry smile. «I wasn't thinking. Just day-dreaming. It's a bad habit we pick up around here.»

«I might bid as high as a dime for a real good dream. I'm Ken Grafton; Captain Grafton, if you please.»

Ron introduced himself and arose. They shook hands, looking each other over. Ken was also in his thirties; Ron guessed his age at thirty-two. He had already seen him around the camp before and liked his looks. Ken was tall, and while at first glance he appeared to be thin, the shape of solid muscles showed through his thin khaki shirt and pants.

«To get back to that generous offer of yours,» Ron said, «the dreams aren't for sale. I either hoard them or give them away.»

«Maybe I don't need your dream at that. Maybe I've got one just like it of my own.» Ken spoke in a bantering tone, but his voice was a shade lower, tighter.

«In that case . . .» Ron stopped short. For ten long seconds they looked at each other, both smiling, challenging, asking. At last Ron said, «Sometimes A's dream plus B's dream adds up to something real.»

An alertness flickered swiftly across Ken's face, a look of intelligence, appreciative of what Ron meant. Instead of replying he grasped Ron's arm just above the elbow, pressed it, let his hand linger for a fraction of a moment before withdrawing it. But Ron turned aside,