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SOCIAL vs PERSONAL INCLINATION

Among the rash of American novels concerned in greater or lesser degree with the manifestations of homosexuality, «Quatrefoils» by James Barr is outstanding for its sensitivity, its artistic quality and the logical development of its theme — the spiritual guidance of a young man by his older and more mature friend.

Phillip Froelich and Tim Danelaw are irresistably drawn to each other. Both are in every obvious respect what is generally termed masculine. There is no suggestion of the effeminate — nothing that could evoke the characterization of gay. Their backgrounds and personalities are thoroughly American, and they live and work in a completely normal man's social and professional world. Other men respect and admire their courage and ability and even their physical prowess. Women are very much attracted to both of them.

Tim, the older of the two, has already recognized and resolved the problem of his sexual deviation. Phillip has not. A product of rural American mores and attitudes, he has a fierce contempt for «queers» and at the same time a deep and secret dread that the germ of homosexuality may be buried somewhere within himself. One or two incidents in his life have shaken him profoundly and have made him determined ruthlessly to crush any tendencies in himself as well as to avoid any close relations with other men. He is engaged to be married as soon as he is discharged from the Navy, and he intends to rear a big family, to take over the operations of his family's bank and other interests, and to become a responsible and civic-minded leader in his community. As the story opens, he has almost reached the refuge and security he has so carefully planned. But then he meets Danelaw. From that moment the struggle begins — a tense and shattering emotional upheaval composed of aversion, self-contempt, admiration and — finally — love.

«Quatrefoil» is a deeply moral novel. Two men of integrity and intellect are confronted with the knowledge that they are deviates from the normal pattern of our society — that most people in that society would abhor and persecute them if they openly avowed their difference. Both men avidly desire to live within the social conventions and to attain the ends that motivate all men — a home, a family, respect in their community, an opportunity to do honest and satisfying work, to realize their ambitions. At one important point they discuss their relationship as follows:

Phillip veiled his eyes and forced a thumbnail between his teeth. At length he burst out, «But I don't hate women. They are an important part of my life. My mother, my sister Fanchon, my cousin Anne —.»

«Where is the woman you have loved better than yourself as yet?»

«There is none. Unless —»

Tim laughed. «I? Whatever we are to each other, it's hardly right to say that either of us is merely a substitute for femininity.

The father-son relationship, perhaps, since we've both desired it so strongly, but not the other. Have you ever felt you were a substitute?»

«Hardly. It's something else, close, not marital but friendly, companionable, fraternal, comradely — all these things raised to the nth power. Has it a name?»

«It must have or we've lost touch with everything that is human.»

«Tim, what does Proust mean by the German idea of homosexuality?»

«I'm not sure. Some dual standard of loyalty probably. I think I know where to get the answer in terms we can accept, despite its obvious delicate implications.»

«Do you suppose it is the same as the Ancient Greek conception?»

«Possibly. You understand that well enough, don't you?»

«Yes. I can even sympathize with it. The Sacred Band of Thebes — one hundred young warriors, each fighting at the side of his best friend, the flower of an admirable society. It would be very easy to uphold honesty, courage, decency to the very last under those circumstances.

«And the Spartans who encouraged — even demanded — that each warrior adopt a young athlete for his own. Homosexuality was often the inevitable outgrowth but never the end in itself. The warriors went into battle in view of their young charges, the supposition being that they would fight the more fiercely. And the young favorites in the gymnasium, for their part, strove for perfection, supremacy; each reluctant to show pain or cowardice and thereby draw down disgrace upon his champion.»

Phillip laced his fingers together on his chest as he talked. His eyes fondled the emerald against his dark hands.

«Their world needed such relationships. Its safety depended on the personal integrity of the individual. The fighting man was its most valuable asset. But our world. There is no place for such things. Sexual aberration is social disaster. Be different and be damned was never truer than here and now. The average individual doesn't dare show tolerance.»

«Then wouldn't you say there is something lacking in such an order?»

«It's the best we have,» Phillip said. «We'll make the best of it.»

«And what are the rewards of this demanding world of yours?»

«That which is best for the majority. Happiness, perhaps.»

«Personal happiness?»

«Personal pride in having done one's best.»

«Rather idealistic,» Tim observed.

«Perhaps. But nothing is emptier than the pursuit of pleasure.»

«You're right,» Tim agreed.

«You see, Tim,» Phillip said suddenly, «your argument isn't reasonable. Suppose I granted your first point, that homosexuality is justifiable in certain instances and under certain controls. Then here is the catch: where does justification end and degeneracy begin? Society must condemn to protect. Permit even the intellectual homosexual a place of respect and the first bar is down. Then comes the next and the next until the sadist, the flagellist, the criminally insane demand their places, and society ceases to exist. So I ask again: where is the line drawn? Where does degeneracy begin if not at the beginning of individual freedom in such matters?»

«Perhaps it begins where the desire of the individual begins to actually destroy his fellow men.»

«And would I not be destroying if I permitted myself to, do as my emotions might prompt me? Would I not be destroying integrity?»

«Or more important, would you not be destroying yourself as you are at this moment?»

«Why do you constantly bring that up?»

«To make you think. Are you happy doing what you think is right?»

«Yes!»

«Your answer is too prompt. You impress me as a man who has embraced a religion fanatically — not because he believes in God but because he's afraid of going to Hell. Would you call melancholia a type of happiness? Tell me frankly, Phillip, how many times in the past ten years have you been happy?»

«I — I can't say accurately. Three, maybe four. A few days with Anne.»

«But society says Anne is taboo for you.»

«The birth of Fan's boys.»

«Vicarious fatherhood for you.»

«Really, Tim!»

«And the third time, Phillip, the third time you were happy, when was that? A night in San Francisco, perhaps?»

Phillip dropped his eyes. «I'm afraid so.»

«Which leaves us with a problem in words: social versus personal inclination. You must decide.»

«But, Tim, you haven't answered my first question: what is justifiable? What is degenerate?»

Tim looked at him closely. «That, Phillip, you must answer for yourself. That, if you are wise, will be your secret always; and, incidentally, your key to personal happiness, for that is the dividing line of your dual life.»

AS I LAY WITH MY HEAD IN YOUR LAP CAMERADO

from Drum-Taps by Walt Whitman

As I lay with my head in your lap camerado,
The confession I made I resume, what I said to you and the open air
I resume,
I know I am restless and make others so,
I know my words are weapons full of danger, full of death,
For I confront peace, security, and all the settled laws, to unsettle them.
I am more resolute because all have denied me than I could ever have
been had all accepted me,
I heed not and have never heeded either experience, cautions, majorities
or ridicule,
And the threat of what is call'd hell is little or nothing to me,
And the lure of what is call'd heaven is little or nothing to me;
Dear camerado, I confess I have urged you onward with me, and still
urge you, without the least idea what is our destination,
Or whether we shall be victorious, or utterly quell'd and defeated.