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An All Male Triangle

*Mary Renault, «THE CHARIOTEER»
Longmans, Green and Co., London, 15sh.*

Very rarely has the problem of male Homosexuality been dealt with in fiction by a female writer. I remember, a good many years ago, Mrs. Blair Niles: «Strange Brother», a novel with a sympathetic, compassionate though rather timid approach to this theme, ending, alas even then, with our old friend, the suicide. So Mary Renault's new novel «The Charioteer» is for this reason alone, quite a surprise. But I should like to say at once that Mary Renault's approach is far more direct, far deeper reaching in its effect and artistically on a far higher level than Blair Niles'. Mary Renault concentrates nearly exclusively on her male protagonists and except for the small though decisive part of a mother, women do not play large parts in this long novel. There is reason for this, as the author takes up as the basis of her plot, a theme, rarely if ever before dealt with, an all male triangle. This second surprise of the book is soon followed by a realization of an exceptionally able and gifted writer as Mary Renault is, shown in the way, in which she builds up her triangle theme, certainly one of the most difficult to describe at all. This combination of craftsmanship in the artistic field and female intuition on the other hand, has produced here an outstanding novel on the theme of male homosexuality. Add to all this the fact that the author has the courage to let her three protagonists live on; two of them united and the third one able to face his own life, and you have the full extent of this excellent book's hopeful message.

The title of the book «The Charioteer» is taken from Plato's «Phaedrus». The Charioteer is the self, the two winged horses which draw him, the spirit and the flesh, or perhaps more accurately, aspiration and desire. The conflict implied by the old Greek myth is the theme of the book. Its first chapters tell of the childhood of Laurie Odell, an only child of divorced parents, and of his attachment to his mother. At school, later, he experiences a violent hero-worship for the school perfect, Ralph Lanyon. Lanyon, a few years his senior, is forced to leave the school on account of a forbidden relation with one of the younger boys. Before he leaves Ralph has a first and last long conversation with Laurie, who is still unaware of his own nature. As a parting gift, he presents Laurie with his own copy of Plato's Phaedrus. They do not meet again until seven years later, when, during the battle of Dunkirk, Laurie, seriously wounded, is taken aboard a ship, whose C. O. is Ralph Lanyon. Ralph is instrumental in saving Laurie's life, though the latter is so far gone, that he does not recognise Ralph, who looks after him. A chance remark made by the delirious Laurie enables Ralph to realize, that they both belong to the same category of men. Later, Ralph tries to contact Laurie by letter but is wrongly informed of his death. Ralph himself loses three of his fingers in a skirmish with the enemy, and has to give up command of his ship.

Nearly a year later, the two men meet again at a gay party. Lucky as this meeting appears to be, it seems apparent, however, it came too late.

Apart from the fact that Ralph is sharing digs with a rather worthless friend, Laurie himself has for the first time in his life, found a spiritual fulfilment in love. He has met and begun to love Andrew Raynes, a young conscientious objector, doing war-service as an orderly in the hospital in which Laurie is a patient. The tragic predicament Laurie finds himself in — of loving two people at the same time, though on somewhat different levels, forms the bigger part of this novel, mounting slowly to a tensely told climax. A climax evading tragedy for the three men involved by hair-breadth. Instead the book closes with a beautifully described happy ending, doubly enjoyed for its being built up logically, as well as for its leaving us with hope and certainty of happiness to come, instead of the usual suicide the reader of homosexual novels has somehow forcibly become accustomed to in nearly all other writings on this theme. As a last word of praise for this excellent book, attention may be drawn to the great artistic ability of Mary Renault, in creating in her three male protagonists, real men and no shadowy cissies. Readers will be grateful to Mary Renault for having shown such understanding rarely met with in these days.

R. Young.

The Postman always rings . . .

Twice. Or so they say. But when I moved into the new apartment, I had to request the postman to ring, please, when he had letters for me. I like receiving letters, and I want to know when they are there. He was an amiable old man, he agreed, and I came to expect his ring almost every day; just before ten, and just after two.

Then one day when he had not rung, I found a letter in the box. And the following day as well. What to do? Remind him, and hope for the best?

But the best was so much better than I had dared hope.

The next morning I heard a letter being left in the box, and opened the door, a good-humoured reproach already formed on my lips. A new postman! That was why —.

He was perhaps twenty three, solidly built — that was evident despite the dull grey uniform which could not completely disguise well-muscled legs, nor conceal powerful shoulders — and his brown eyes were alive and friendly. The hand holding an assortment of letters in its firm grasp was strong, and — —.

Er

Yes, he was new on the route. Yes, he'd be glad to ring. Sure. Why not?

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Extraordinary, the effect a chance meeting can have on a carefully planned life. Without at first being conscious of it, I found myself concentrating my day around nine thirty and two (his was a younger step,