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THE BOYS

By Clarkson Crane

Fred lived in one of those old San Francisco houses, built during the eighties or earlier and still in good condition. Some owners, artistically minded, have painted them black with white window frames and, if permitted by the zoning ordinances, have opened galleries or bookshops in the basements. But not Fred, who was in love with tradition. Whenever a new paint-job was needed, he kept the original gray, which seemed, after all, to go so well with the bay windows, the jigsaw work, the gables, the fog, and the rest. He had lived in the place all his life and knew the histories of most of the other houses in the neighborhood. Of course, there was far too much space for him and Bertie. But, as he said, it was nice to be able to put up friends if one wanted to and he hated the idea of renting out rooms or breaking the old house up into apartments.

Fred had plenty of money. Aside from what his parents had left him, he had made a lot practicing law. He had been a successful attorney of the scholarly sort well into his sixties, when he decided to retire because of circulatory troubles of some kind, and to spend the rest of his life doing what he wanted. Fred was a great reader. When I first knew him, long before his retirement, back in the twenties, I passed many hours in his library; he was generous about lending me books; I always liked to talk with him about them, or rather I liked to hear him talk, because at nineteen I felt I didn't have much to offer him.

As it turned out I was wrong there: I had a lot to offer him. One evening I brought Bertie to the house and Bertie has been there ever since. His house, his law practice, and Bertie. Of the three I suppose Fred would have considered Bertie the most important.

I met Bertie as one meets people when one is young. I did not think too highly of him. He was thirty-five or so, good-looking in a blond, slender way, and had a soft voice and a pleasant sense of humor. In the course of time I brought him to see Fred one evening. After we had been in the house for an hour, Fred took me into the library, overlooking the backyard, and wanted to know all about Bertie. I told him what I could, which wasn't much.

«But, Richard,» he asked in an excited whisper, «is he safe?»

I said I thought so, but couldn't guarantee anything. At any rate, I assured him that Bertie meant nothing to me and that he had a clear field as far as I was concerned. That night I left the house alone.

Until he was in his forties, when he met Bertie, Fred had never done very much. He was always afraid people would find out about him — first, his parents until they died, then his cousins and his aunts and uncles, his clients, the milkman, the grocer, God only knew who else. Of course, he found someone now and then. Our relationship started like that, but was never anything serious, and we soon became just good friends. Fred had to have someone to talk to; I guess I filled that place in his life. He used to urge me to study law. Perhaps I should

have done so, because I certainly haven't accomplished much in life with the piddling little job I've had all these years.

At first, I thought Bertie would just be a thing of a day. He was all right, but I really didn't think he was anything to thrill one. He wasn't working at the time. Naturally, it was pleasant for him to stay with Fred — the big house, the lovely old furniture Fred's parents and grandparents had spent years collecting, the servants. Physically, Fred really didn't have a great deal. He was a round little man with clear, honest blue eyes and thinning hair already showing gray. He was precise, a bit fussy, a terrific worker, and filled with anxiety. There must have been something about Bertie's calm and his apparent indolence that Fred found soothing. I say apparent indolence, because Bertie turned out to be anything but indolent when he really got interested in something like repainting a room or sanding a floor. Anyway, three weeks later, when I saw Fred again, he said that Bertie had moved in with him.

«Is he safe?» I asked, laughing.

«Richard!» he said, looking embarrassed. «You mustn't even suggest such a thing, you naughty boy!»

Next month Bertie got a job as window dresser in a department store.

«Of course, it's not what he really wants,» Fred told me. «But we think it's a good way for him to get a foothold.»

The years passed and Fred and Bertie remained together. Security rather than excitement was evidently what Bertie wanted. He had a series of jobs and always did well, except for the fact that he didn't keep them. At one time or another he worked in the display department of nearly every store in the city and twice Fred set him up on his own as an interior decorator. He sold encyclopedias, vacuum cleaners, insurance, and automobiles; for five years he was clerk in a bookshop and for a while had a gift shop of his own. Everyone liked him. His hair began to turn gray early; at fifty, about the time Fred was thinking of retiring, Bertie was a tall, slender, silver-haired man with clear-cut features, a kind of Harvard accent he had somehow developed through the years, a highly critical attitude toward everything and everyone, the quietest and very best clothes, and a big seal ring, bearing presumably his family crest, on the little finger of his left hand.

I don't mean to say that during all this time he had been entirely faithful to Fred. There had been other men in his life. I remember how disturbed Fred was the first time he learned Bertie had a younger friend. I really thought he was going to have a nervous breakdown. But little by little he accepted the idea that Bertie would stray.

«After all,» Fred said, «he's young and I can't expect him to give up all his fun.»

There were one or two unhappy incidents. One of Bertie's friends, whom he had unwisely brought to the house, got out of control, slightly damaged Bertie, and broke to pieces a little mahogany table that had belonged to Fred's grandmother. Another young man tried blackmail but landed in jail, for, after all, Fred was a lawyer and knew what to

do. But, all in all, things went well, Bertie being fairly discreet, and as time passed Fred and Bertie and the big house became a kind of institution.

Their friends were divided into two parts — the straight and the gay, and the straight in turn into those who knew and those who didn't. I must add that this final division was largely illusory, because it seemed to me that nearly everyone knew.

Of course, Fred didn't think so. His family had lived in San Francisco since eighteen forty-nine and he had a multitude of connections. But one by one the older ones died, the younger ones drifted into their own groups, and those who remained accepted Fred for what he was. Fred would say:

«I simply couldn't bear the idea of Emily's knowing about me,» or «You don't think Mary suspects, do you?»

I happened to be acquainted with Emily and Mary, both in their sixties, and had heard them drop tactful words indicating they were quite aware of the situation. They liked Bertie and thought it was good for Fred to have someone living with him. And Bertie, who perhaps needed a mother, was certainly nice to them.

During the war it seemed foolish for Bertie to have a job. He was well into his fifties and, as Fred insisted, had never really been very strong. Naturally, being patriotic, he performed certain tasks that contributed to the war effort, such as writing letters to servicemen overseas, and for more than a month he acted as block-warden. But there was housework to do, for by this time the old servants were no more and new ones were hard to find. I have observed that, if life does nothing else to a homo, it teaches him to cook. This was certainly true in Fred's case. When he was a child, his family had always had a Chinese cook and I don't suppose his mother ever went near the kitchen except to give orders. But, after his retirement, during the late thirties and the war years, Fred studied cook books, pottered about in an apron, roundish, balding, gray-haired, and happy, and produced meals that all his friends looked forward to. Bertie was a great help with the dishes and a woman came in twice a week to do the cleaning.

After the war they wanted to travel. But there were difficulties. Fred was afraid to leave the house unoccupied with all the furniture, the silverware, the oriental rugs, and the vases, and he would not consider renting it to a stranger. It is true that many of the pieces were worthy of a museum. Finally Fred's cousin, Ethel, a woman of nearly seventy, agreed to leave her house in Carmel and spend a month as caretaker while the boys, as she called them, went to Mexico. It seemed to be a good arrangement. But Fred had dizzy spells in Mexico City, both he and Bertie had other troubles, and they were back home before the month was up. The following year Ethel moved into the house again while Fred and Bertie took a leisurely trip to South America, avoiding high altitudes. But, not long after they returned, Ethel died in Carmel and they knew no one else to whom they could safely entrust their possessions.

So they settled down to a pleasant life in the big house, two old bachelors, set in their ways. Fred was in his seventies, Bertie past sixty. Most of their friends, especially the few middle-aged or elderly women they still knew, called them 'the boys'. They gave little dinners, were invited out to little dinners, went for short trips in their car, Bertie always driving, and had all the latest musical devices — radios, television sets, hi-fi, tape recorders, everything you could think of. Fred spent a lot of time reading, in several languages. Books overflowed the shelves and lay everywhere in piles. Bertie urged Fred to write something, perhaps drawn from his legal career, and Fred said he would, but he never did. It was easier to pick up a book and settle down for the morning, while Bertie fooled around making new draperies, planned how to do the dining room over, or wondered what color to paint the walls in the third floor bedrooms where guests often stayed.

By now most of their friends were gay and nearly all of them much younger. They would have Bob and Al to dinner one night, Jim and Bill another, and would dine at Joe and Henry's or Peter and Mike's on other evenings. All these younger friends, most of whom had only been paired off for a few years, said Bertie and Fred, who had been together thirty years or more, were really an inspiration. Some of them still found Bertie attractive, for he had a young face and was as tall and willowy as ever. Fred was quite resigned to Bertie's having younger friends. In fact, their social life was largely a matter of entertaining or being entertained by youngish men whom Bertie had met in one way or another.

Fred stayed home with his books or his records when Bertie went out. During those years there was a bar called Florio's where the more elegant gathered and looked at one another with mild disdain. Bertie was well known there. No one could find fault with his clothes, his smoothly-brushed silver hair, his generosity in buying drinks, his gentle voice, and his sense of humor. and they all knew that, parked near by, was a long, dark car that would whisk them away to even more elegant surroundings.

Fred often invited me to dinner when he was alone. We would spend a quiet evening before the fire with our whiskey and sodas and Fred would tell me how fortunate he was to have found Bertie. Whatever storm and stress may have marred the earlier years of their friendship no longer existed. Everything now was harmony. Bertie had his own quarters, two or three rooms, where he could bring his friends whenever he wanted, and Fred had his own bookish and musical part of the house. It was a wonderful arrangement.

«We're never under each other's feet, if you see what I mean,» said Fred. «Bertie's still young, only sixty-two, and I have to be careful. I can't be as active as I once was. My doctor says I should take it easy and avoid excitement. I'll be seventy-five on my next birthday! Can you imagine?»

The cleaning woman no longer came in; they had found a young Filipino who was much better. Fred preferred not to have women around.

«That old harridan!» he said. «I came in once and found her poking around in my bureau drawers. Women are too nose-y. I just don't want one in the house.»

I usually left about ten o'clock, long before Bertie returned, because I knew Fred liked to go to bed early. One evening, just as I was leaving, while we were standing in the front hall, he told me in confidence that he had willed everything to Bertie, house, contents, securities, everything he owned.

«I know he'll take good care of all this,» he added, resting his hand lovingly on the hall table.

The boys might have gone on in this peaceful way for years if they had not taken up bridge. It was Fred's fault. He had read somewhere that someone said long ago a man would have an unhappy old age if he didn't play whist and he thought there might be something to the idea. I think both he and Bertie knew a little about bridge, so it was really just a question of brushing up. I have always hated all games, any form of competition, and card games especially; I shall not be able to go into detail regarding their bridge playing. All I know is that their life changed completely.

If they had taken up chess instead, all might have been well: they could have sat there, just the two of them, afternoons and evenings, and their life might have been even more tranquil. But it was bridge, and bridge requires four players. Now I believe I am not an exception among the gay in my dislike of games. Of course, some play, but many do not, and it happened that almost none of the boys' friends liked bridge. Bob and Al, Jim and Bill, Joe and Henry, Peter and Mike, all hated bridge as much as I did.

Fred pleaded with me.

«Richard, you must take it up! You can't go through life not playing bridge. Everyone plays bridge.»

I made an attempt, but it was no good. The result was that they fell back on some of the middle-aged and elderly women they still knew and whom they had neglected of late. All of these women had leisure, most of them were rich, usually widows who had been left well taken care of by hard-working husbands who had died young. Emily and Mary, along with Dotty, Mollie, Ruth, and Susan reappeared in the house. It was most convenient. Even if Fred's gay friends had liked bridge, they couldn't have played in the afternoon, because all of them had jobs. But the women were always free.

I used to drop around in the evening and have a drink with them when they had finished their game. I must say that both Fred and Bertie, but especially Fred, seemed to have come alive with this new interest. Fred would sit holding his cards, intent and watchful, his eyes bright in his round, reddish face, wriggling nervously now and then in his chair; Bertie would make suave remarks to the white-haired woman who was his partner and sweep in the tricks. It was hard to win against Bertie, who had a natural talent for the game, above all if he had Dotty as a partner.

I suppose this went on for nearly a year. Once Dotty told me they played frequently in her apartment.

«Fred's a dear, of course, and he does his best», she said, «but Bertie is really good. And I love his sense of humor.»

Dotty was an intelligent and rather dominating woman of sixty-five whose husband had left her a fortune. She had a throaty voice and laughed loudly at Bertie's dry sayings. Fred thought she was quite a character.

But one morning he called me at work.

«Richard,» he said, «I've got to see you.»

«This evening?» I asked.

«Oh, I can't wait until this evening. I must see you right away. Can't you come here to lunch?»

I glanced at the pile of work on my desk.

«Please, Richard,» he said when I did not answer. «Please come. I'm desperate.»

«Okay,» I said. «I'll be right out. I'll take a cab.»

He must have been watching for me, because he opened the front door as soon as the cab stopped. He came running down the steps and paid the driver.

«Oh, Richard,» he said, as we went into the living room. «It's terrible! Bertie and Dotty have got married!»

He finished the cocktail he had been drinking and poured one for me. His hand was shaking.

«I don't know what to do!» he said. «That woman!»

He was certain she had forced Bertie into it. She was a vampire. The idea of a woman of her age taking a young man like Bertie! It was revolting.

I think Fred got lunch somewhere along the line, but I don't remember much about it. I saw at once I couldn't leave him alone and telephoned my office I might not be back at all that day. I tried to calm him.

«Bertie wants to bring her here,» he said. «He says there's plenty of room. I can't stand that woman in the house. I can't stand it.»

He lay down on a sofa and put his left arm over his eyes. I could see the pulse beating fast on his temple. It was not losing Bertie: it was losing Bertie to a woman. Fred knew nothing about women. This was the unknown. This was the deep betrayal. This was the break-up of everything.

«What'll I do?» he said.»

«Where are they now?»

«They've flown to Honolulu.»

At two o'clock I called his doctor, who came after four and gave Fred a sedative. I also called Mary and Emily. Fred went to bed and said he'd be all right and the doctor thought he'd be better after a night's sleep. Mary and Emily agreed to stay in the house.

I saw Fred twice during the following week. He seemed dazed. On Saturday morning Emily telephoned me that he had had a stroke during the night and had been taken to the hospital. He died before morning.

Of course, Bertie and Dotty were deeply distressed.

«I shall never forgive myself,» Bertie told me, looking serene and cool. He covered his eyes for a moment.

But nothing consoles one for the loss of a relative or friend so quickly as a heritage, and then there was Bertie's sense of humor. He and Dotty moved into the house, packed up Fred's personal belongings, and sent them to a charitable organization.

«We know it's what he would have wanted,» said Bertie.

I did not see them for several months. Now and then I read accounts of their doings on the society page. Emily, who had known Dotty for years, often went to the house. She told me Dotty was in love with Bertie, deeply in love, she added, but she wasn't sure Bertie was in love with Dotty.

One night I saw Bertie in a gay bar. He was at the other end of the room and I doubt whether he saw me. He looked amazingly young in the dim light. But about a week later he did see me and we had a drink together. I thought he seemed troubled.

«My night off,» he said with a smile.

It was Emily, whom I met down town one day, who first gave me the idea that all was not well between Dotty and Bertie.

«You know how Dotty is,» she said. «She's the dominating type. But she loves Bertie. She'll do anything for him.»

One late afternoon, just after I had got home from the office, Bertie telephoned.

«Are you going to be home this evening, Richard? I'd like to see you.»

I heard his car door slam about eight o'clock and I had my apartment door open when he came up the stairs. I poured him a drink.

He sat for a few moments without speaking, his hand over his eyes. Then he looked at me and smiled.

«What a mess!» he said.

I didn't speak. A few minutes later he said:

«That bitch!»

We just sat there and drank. Pretty soon I turned on a good music station and kept it low. After a while, we talked about Fred. Suddenly, he turned to me.

«Richard,» he said, «what the hell am I going to do? I can't stand it.»

He was trembling. I gave him another drink. This was the first time I'd known his sense of humor to wear thin. When he left, I went downstairs with him.

«Don't you want me to drive you home?» I asked.

He smiled and shook his head.

A few days later I met Emily on the street. She told me that Bertie had driven to Palm Springs and that Dotty had followed him in her car. They had had a terrible row down there. Bertie had gone to Los Angeles and Dotty had returned to San Francisco, but after a night alone in the house she had caught a plane for the south.

«She loves him.» Emily said. «She really loves him.»

The next thing I heard was that Bertie and Dotty were living separately, she in her old apartment, he in the house.

«Dotty's in a state,» said Emily. «If she weren't strong as a horse,

I'd be worried about her.»

Bertie and Dotty were divorced after the usual formalities. I must say Dotty was decent about the whole thing. She had plenty of money of her own so there was no question of alimony, and Bertie was soon living as he had always lived — minus Fred. He had regained his youthful appearance and I often saw him in gay bars. During the year or two after the divorce he had a number of friends, but nothing permanent.

Bertie was now more than sixty-five, but I must say no one would have guessed it. He seemed to have lots of money. He had a big new convertible, a two-tone job, in which I occasionally saw him gliding about town. One afternoon a young man with red hair was sitting beside him. About a week later he invited me to dinner; a Filipino opened the door for me; there was only one other guest, the red-haired young man.

«Richard,» said Bertie, «this is Ted Bowley.»

I could see that Ted liked the house, the furniture, the dinner, and that he really seemed fond of Bertie. He was just starting as an architect and had a job as draftsman with an architectural firm. He talked well about housing problems and about his own ideas of domestic architecture in California.

A few weeks later Ted moved into the house. The next time I went there to dinner there were two other gay couples — Bob and Al, Jim and Bill. We had lots to drink. Bertie, silver-haired and distinguished at the head of the table, talked freely.

He said that Ted and he were planning to remodel the upper floors of the house into two-and three-room apartments. That would leave them the entire first floor, which was all the room they needed. Then something really could be done in the basement, because the lot sloped and one could put in a nice little two-roomer in the back with a small private garden.

«In a way it's a shame to split up the old house, but it's too big for us, and we think we really could do something very attractive.»

Ted described what they had in mind, using technical terms. I said I wished they'd reserve one of the smaller apartments for me. They assured me they would, but it was all said laughingly, because I felt sure they would ask far more rent than I could pay.

Aside from being an architect, Ted obviously had a fondness for older men. I had often heard Bertie say he didn't like red hair, but I suppose he felt, at his age, that he could not be too particular. After all, gerontophiles are not common and cannot be lightly dismissed for minor defects.

Bertie and Ted are certainly getting along well together. The last time I was at the house Ted unrolled blueprints and Bertie said they hoped to get started on the job early in the spring. They took me all over the house to show me just what would be where.

When I left, they both came to the front door with me. Bertie stood with one hand on Ted's shoulder and the other resting on the hall table. Ted, with youthful enthusiasm, gave additional details about the work to be undertaken, while Bertie, smiling, watched him with affectionate eyes.

It was easy to see who would be next in the line of succession.

„der neue ring“

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