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The Recurrent Strain

by Chick Weston.

I watched the noisy, bustling crowd around the Notice Board with an amused smile. The hopes and expectations of many a college athlete had been decided, and the hopeful candidates and their friends were eagerly scanning the list of competitors who were to represent our University at the forthcoming Inter-University Games. As the chairman of the Squash section I was on the Central Committee, and the team selection had taken us the whole afternoon.

Shouts of joy and an occasional groan came from the crowd which slowly broke up as the students drifted off into the fresh air to discuss the team's prospects, and to argue about one or another of the selections. As the crowd dwindled to the last half dozen, I saw a familiar figure approach the board. He had been standing at some distance from the board and had not been a part of the hustling, pushing crowd. It was Terry Matthews, our star weightlifter in the lightweight division, and our own University record holder.

Terry was a mystery to us all. He had entered the University on a scholarship in the same year as myself, and was proving himself a most determined student. He never mixed with the rest of the students around the campus, and when not studying was usually to be found in the gymnasium or at the swimming pool. There was nothing unfriendly about him — he just never started a conversation, nor did he ever join a group without being invited. When addressed, his replies were always friendly but seemed to have a finality about them, as if wishing to terminate the discussion. Powerfully built, he soon established himself as an outstanding weightlifter — a sport rather neglected at our college — and an above-average wrestler. Stockily built, he had a mop of light brown hair and a face that was, at best, a pleasant one. His nose was slightly hooked, his lips a shade too full, his eyes steel grey. It was an interesting face, as if the owner found no pleasure in life, but was determined to reach some unseen goal.

As the last of the crowd drifted away, I walked over to the notice board.

«Hello, Terry. Congratulations on making the team, and good luck.»

«Thanks, David. I won't let you down! Nice team.»

With that he started to turn away.

«Oh, Terry. How are you going down to the games?»

«By bus with the rest of the team, I guess. Why?»

«Just wondered. You see, I have to go down as a sort of advance guard — leave here on the Thursday afternoon in my car, sleep over at the motel up on the mountain, and get to C... early to make arrangements for the team. My fiancée Margaret Ekkers is coming with me, and we are taking Joyce Duval down as her parents live in C... I suddenly thought, well, that is... maybe you might like to come along with me in the car.»

«Gosh, that would be grand... but, well to put it plainly, I cannot afford the expense of a motel, and the petrol and everything.»

«Good heavens, it won't cost you anything. We have a special travelling allowance, and the Committee has authorised me to fill my car and will pay all my petrol expenses and everything else... except any champagne we drink, of course.»

«Well, that is different. Thanks a million for asking me. I certainly prefer a quiet trip to that noisy mob who will be in the bus all day.»

«Right. We leave immediately after lectures on Thursday. I'll pick up the girls at their hostel and then meet you in front of our hostel with our luggage.»

We parted then and I rushed off to tell Margaret the news. Now I had better explain that she was my fiancée — with a difference. We grew up together in the same small town and our families were old friends. Some years before, I had unexpectedly surprised Margaret and a classmate of hers in what I might term «unusual circumstances», and when she came to see me that evening to explain and to solicit an oath of secrecy, I confessed to her that I too was «different», and that she need fear nothing. Thereafter we became inseparable, and with her friend we all went to University together. Our families were delighted at our friendship and whilst protesting that we were too young, had agreed to our becoming engaged on condition that we did not marry until we had qualified. Little did they realise that this engagement was one of convenience for both of us, but then they were happy in their ignorance.

Margaret was delighted to hear the news, for I had told her on several occasions that I could easily lose my heart over Terry. He was the type of person I wanted — in the physical sense, for I had never had the chance to get to know him as a person. Now at least I would be together with him for a whole day and I counted the hours until the day of departure.

The trip down to the University where the sports were to be held was a full day's run, and so we drove until fairly late that evening and finally booked in as arranged at the motel, approximately half our journey completed. After a late supper, we sat in the garden for a while and then the girls decided to retire. I was ready for bed myself, and as I got up to go, Terry suggested a walk. After being cramped in the car for several hours I was quite prepared for a little exercise and readily agreed. It was a bright moonlight night and it was not difficult to follow the path along the side of the mountain. As we walked, we talked — I think it started off with the peace and quiet of the countryside, and Terry started talking about the village where he was born. We switched easily from one subject to another, and I found him a surprisingly fine conversationalist. Being of Welsh extraction, his voice had that delightful lilt and resonance that made it a delight to listen to, and I let him do most of the talking. It was quite late before we reached our bungalow and stripped for bed.

I fell asleep immediately and the next thing I knew was the sheet being pulled off me and a firm smack on my seat. The sun had just risen, and in the half light I saw Terry standing over me, naked as the day he was born and with a towel over his shoulder.

«Come along. Let's have a swim to wake ourselves up!»

«Say, are you mad? Where do we swim in this place?»

«Goodness to be, it's you that are daft» said Terry in his broadest Welsh accent, «and do you go walking around with your eyes shut? Did you not see that little pool last night on the ridge at the back of the motel?»

«Yes, I remember it now, but my costume is in my trunk in the boot of the car.»

«Oh you little prude» smiled Terry, «and who is to see you at this hour of the morning, may I ask?»

A minute later we ducked around the back of the bungalow with our towels around our waists and disappearing amongst the trees, soon reached the little pool we had passed the night before. We plunged in, and came up gasping for

breath, for the water was ice cold, in spite of the summer heat already making itself felt. I did not stay in long and was almost dry before Terry emerged, stretched himself delightedly and started doing a wild savage dance, finally flinging himself back into the pool. When he emerged I stared at him, for he was so entirely different from the completely withdrawn Terry I knew at the University. As he stood there, rubbing himself briskly, the little drops of water glistening on his bronzed muscular chest and running in rivulets down, I knew that if I had once worshipped him from afar, I was now completely, and head-over-heels in love with him. Was it to remain just an idle dream? . . . time alone could tell.

After breakfast we set off again, and Terry who had been fairly silent on the run the previous afternoon, now took a lively interest in the conversation and proved that he had a ready and sharp wit.

It was midday before we reached our destination, and found that all the visiting teams were to be accommodated in an old army camp. We dropped Joyce at her parents' home and Margaret at the girls' camp, and then reported to the Reception committee and were allocated our bungalows. It was a peculiarly designed camp, with sets of three bungalows in the shape of a triangle forming a unit, and with small single rondavels at each point — no doubt reserved for the senior N.C.Os. Terry and I grabbed one of these single huts in which there were two beds, a handbasin, and shower and toilet recesses. The main bungalows had a cubicle at each end, and each contained a composite wash room and toilet. Terry questioned our right to a small rondavel but I assured him that we could soon establish our right. Going over to the dining hall, we found that no tables had yet been allocated, and as we were the first arrivals, we promptly tipped the catering manager and secured for our team a section which had no doubt been the N.C.Os Mess and which had a separate entrance and a view across the river. After lunch we went to the stores and drew our bedding. A thought then struck me and on making enquiries I found that we could draw bedding for our entire team and that this arrangement suited the storemen very well. Having deposited our own gear, we changed into running shorts and sandshoes and fetching a handcart soon had all the bedding nicely divided amongst the three bungalows. For the rest of the afternoon we sunbathed, until a sudden storm came up and drove us indoors, just as our team arrived. We had reserved one rondavel for the Captain and Vice-Captain, and whilst some of the seniors queried our occupying private quarters, we were not dislodged. All the other teams were now arriving, and when our teammates realised how well we had provided for them, and had saved them the unpleasant task of collecting their own bedding, standing in a queue in the rain, we were hailed as heroes.

After dinner we all assembled in a large hall where it was explained to us that Saturday morning had been reserved as a training session, that there was to be the march past and opening ceremony in the afternoon, that Sunday was free and that the games themselves would begin on Monday.

We all decided to retire early, and Terry and I went into our bungalow and having stripped, lay on our beds chatting. Suddenly he gave a bit of a grunt and informed me that he had apparently strained a muscle in the small of his back pulling the handcart.

«Come on. Turn over and I'll massage it for you.»

«Thanks, David, but I'll see the massage bloke in the morning. No use messing about with it now.»

«I'll have you know, Mr. Matthews, that I hold a diploma for massage and physiotherapy, and have earnd some useful pocket money during the vacations back home helping at a health clinic. Now don't argue — turn over.»

«Well, that is different. Carry on.»

He turned on his stomach and I pulled back the blanket. There was no radiant heat lamp, but I warmed his back with the reading lamp and began slowly to massage. It was a job I always enjoyed, especially when working with a well-formed patient, and when I had completed my task around the tender area, I started to massage his shoulders and legs. Having completed the task, I told Terry to turn over and massaged his chest and arms, treated his stomach muscles, and then took one leg at a time and completed my task. I sat on the edge of his bed and slowly rubbed my hands over his shoulders. He had closed his eyes whilst I was working, but opened them now and looked at me.

«David» and his voice was soft and very gentle, «you're a real pal. Thanks a lot . . . for the massage, and . . .for understanding.»

The bedside light went out and in the dark I felt his arms come around my shoulders and pull me down. With his head on my chest he whispered:

«David, this is heaven itself. I've wanted someone like you for so long. Last night I knew it was you I wanted; but, tell me, what about Margaret?»

There and then I told him the truth, not only about Margaret, but also about my feelings towards him. The hours of darkness moved on until we finally slept.

Of the Games there is little to tell that affects this tale. Terry broke the weightlifting record, I won a second place in the squash pairs event. The old Terry was gone, and whilst he always remained reserved, he mixed more freely with his fellow students and we were together whenever we could spare the time, and especially in the gymnasium and at the swimming pool.

The war broke out as we prepared for our final examinations, and no sooner had we qualified than Terry joined the forces, and after his initial training was drafted to Malaya. I would have gone with him, but my father died and I was given a temporary exemption to arrange matters in his business. Terry wrote regularly, for being an orphan and an only child, he had nobody else. We had devised a little code which enabled us to say far more than could otherwise have been written. In due course I was free and volunteered for service. Eventually just as the Japanese invaded Malaya I found myself posted to India, to a spot on the Burmese border. I was a junior officer in a small engineering unit, with apparently no specific task but to sit and wait. With the fall of Singapore news ceased to come through from Terry, but in his last letter he indicated that he was going up to Burma.

For weeks there was silence, — to me an almost unbearable silence, for the agony of uncertainty is the worst agony of all. Weeks without news were like months, and then the first few refugees began to trickle across the border from Burma. Some were civilians, mainly local inhabitants, some whites. Their news was vague . . . they talked of rearguard actions, of retreat, a fight and then another retreat.

I had a little hut not far from the road along which these refugees came, and some distance from the unit lines. I had nothing to do and so got into the habit of going to help a hastily erected reception centre take in and distri-

bute the refugees. Finally the day came when some weary wounded and sick soldiers arrived with tidings that Burma was virtually lost and that with vehicles destroyed they were told to make their way back on foot. None knew Terry or anything about his unit. Ever hopeful, I asked every soldier I saw, and came to spend more and more time at the reception centre.

It was an eternity until that unforgettable afternoon when I looked down to road and saw three men stumbling along. They were just three men, or wrecks of men, for their clothes were in tatters, and they were filthy and haggard. One of them was Terry. His hair was matted and his left shoulder and left thigh were swathed in filthy blood-stained rags, but it was Terry. I rushed down and took his arm from around the neck of his nearest companion who was in almost equally poor shape. Terry looked up, his steel grey eyes dimmed and bloodshot. «David», he whispered, and fainted. His companions went on. I lifted him gently, carried him to my jeep which stood nearby and dashed off to my bungalow. There I wasted no time, but stripped off his rags and uncovered the festering wounds, which were fortunately not very serious. I had a small medicine chest with some essential first-aid kit, and promptly cleand up the wounds. I cut off most of the matted filthy hair on his head and his beard and washed him as well as I could from head to toe.

Having satisfied myself that he was clean and that his wounds were properly dressed. I laid him on my bed and covered him with a sheet. He seemed to be sleeping quite peacefully and I was glad to note that he had practically no temperature. I had sent my servant to fetch a local civilian doctor, for I knew that if I called in the army doctor, he would order Terry to hospital. The doctor arrived soon afterwards and at the end of a careful examination, assured me that Terry required nothing more than rest, good food and some minor attention to his wounds. He looked a bit dubious about accepting my story that Terry was a civilian friend of mine, but a handsome fee soon settled that matter, and thereafter he looked in regularly until his services were no longer needed.

Terry woke up later that evening and it was heartbreaking to watch him gulp down the chicken broth which I had had prepared, and to feel his eyes following me around wherever I went, but I was determined that he should not upset his stomach by overeating at this first meal. Then he fell asleep and I sat by his bedside watching.

By the morning he already looked brighter, but was so weak that he could neither feed nor wash himself, and so for the next few days I nursed him and looked after him from early morning till late at night. I had sent a message to my unit to carry on and assist with the refugees pouring in and once a day my senior N.C.O. would report to me to make his report and receive instructions. It was lucky that we were a completely forgotten crowd during that period.

After a few days I let Terry sit out for a few hours in the early mornings and in the cool of the evening. He had no clothes, but the weather was very warm and I managed to get a pair of shorts that fitted him. Slowly the strength came back to him, the colour returned to his cheeks and the skin over his bones was no longer stretched tight over a skeleton. As he gained in strength, we started talking about all that had happened in the past many months, and my favourite place was on the ground at his feet, with my head on his thigh. Soon he was able to get about on his own and I was able to devote a little more time to my official duties of looking after the men in my unit.

Then one night, after we had had a long talk, with the lights out and with myself sitting on his bed, he said:

«David, it is wonderful to feel like a human being again. I can really feel myself getting stronger by the day — thanks to you.»

«That's great, Terry. It is grand having you here — this war will go on, and we will no doubt be parted again some day, but when it is over, you and I are going to get together and set up some business — and that for keeps. How do you feel about that?»

«David boy, that is my idea too. By the way, I think I strained my back a bit today — same place! — Anything you can do about it?»

«That recurrent strain! Terry, you know I can do something about it!»

I DID . . .

From: The New Statesman, London

Homosexuals and the Law

The Wolfenden Report is at last to be debated in parliament. As is now well known, it recommends that the indulgence in homosexual relations, in private and with mutual consent, by men who have reached the age of 21 shall cease to be a criminal offence. Is there any good reason why this recommendation should not be carried out?

There are various arguments which might be brought against it. It has been said, for instance, that public opinion is not ready for the change. As a statement of fact, this is not easy to discuss since no scientific inquiry into the state of public opinion on this question has yet been undertaken. It is not known what answers people would give if the issue were put to them clearly. I think it probable indeed that a majority would be found to disapprove of homosexuality. The disapproval of sodomy is still widespread. But from the fact that a person disapproves of homosexual practices it does not follow that he thinks they should be treated as crimes. Such evidence as there is available, for example of the public's reaction to the Montagu case, does not suggest that there is general satisfaction with the way the law now operates or a strong majority opinion that it should not be changed.

Moreover, even if it were established that the majority of the public was in favour of leaving things as they are, this would not relieve the members of parliament from the responsibility of forming their own judgments and acting in accordance with them. They should take the state of public opinion into account, but they have not to be entirely guided by it. It is not and should not be a principle of government that social reform must wait upon a favourable plebiscite. No plebiscite dictated the reform of the Factory Acts in the 1870s. It is possible even that, had a vote been taken, a majority would have been found against reform: for many people believed that it was wrong and futile for the state to interfere in such economic questions, and many of the factory workers themselves were against the abolition of child labour, because they did not see how they could survive without the money that their children earned.

Yet I do not suppose that anyone would now maintain that these measures should not have been enacted until the public had received a sufficient education in economics. At the present time it would appear that a majority of the