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WHITE SHORTS

by O. F. Simpson

Scene — Nice, Promenade des Anglais. Time — August, 1958. Being English, I enjoy a stroll along «my» promenade, and on this particular morning had just crossed over onto the shore side when my eye was caught by a pair of dazzling white beach shorts worn by one of the sunbathers on the beach in front of me. As I have good reason to know professionally, all-white beach shorts are not common in Europe — most manufacturers have had difficulty in finding a cloth which remains opaque when wet; so in spite of having other things to do, I began to speculate idly about the make of the shorts, the design of which was also new to me. As I looked down on him from above, the exceptionally fine proportions of the wearer's body also began to impress me.

The shorts were short indeed. Flared open at the lower end where his thighs disappeared inside them, they were stretched tight across the curves of one of the most beautiful athlete's bottoms I had ever seen; above the elastic waistband his bare brown torso seemed to be poured out across the beach, topped by a lean, handsome, red-Indian-style face with thick, stiff, black «penwiper» hair. He lay absolutely still — asleep, I supposed; only the faintest perceptible movement of his diaphragm as he breathed showed me he wasn't dead.

Two things led me to decide he was probably a countryman of my own — the defiant abandon with which he lay head towards the sea unlike everyone else on the beach, and a rather dirty waterproof by his side, which seemed to be his only clothes. I watched him for nearly twenty minutes, enjoying the perfection of his glorious body in repose; after that, he woke, stretched once or twice slowly and luxuriantly like an animal, got up, put on the waterproof and sat down again on the beach, evidently changing clothes under the mackintosh — a procedure which I feel sure is forbidden by the bye-laws of Nice, though this did not appear to worry him. After threshing about a bit he stood up ready to go in for a swim. I was pleased to see him wearing a blue Port-Cros minimum slip, the design I consider the simplest and best of all for those who have the figure to carry it off. Barefoot and completely disregarding the pebbles on the beach — from which I inferred he was as tough as he was good-looking — he walked quickly down to the sea, swam out fast, and was soon lost to my sight among the bathers.

Professional curiosity about those shorts began to nag me. I fought against it for several minutes, then decided to go and take a look. I walked down to the beach, crossed to where his clothes lay, picked the shorts up and began to examine them. They were American, from a Hollywood maker, I found. I noticed the clever way in which the frontal jock strap was slung not to the back of the shorts but to the sides, by thick elastic passing under the wearer's buttocks and so slightly lifting them; and I had my hand actually inside his jock strap to feel the quality of the lining, when suddenly a rather surly voice spoke behind me:

«Que faites-vous alors? Will you kindly leave my shorts alone?»

I was caught red-handed, by the owner himself — who did not however seem to be sure what to make of the situation. Two thoughts struck me at once: one, that the pronunciation of the two sentences left no doubt I had been right in thinking him English; two, and quite irrelevant, that he had none of the mean, bedraggled look that bathers have when they first leave the water —

seen close to, even with the water dripping off his chin, he was a more magnificent figure of a young chap than ever. I decided quickly that attack was going to be the best form of defence.

«Well, I'm professionally interested in these things, so I thought I'd take a look.»

«Oh, are you a tailor or something?»

For some reason it always seems faintly insulting to be called a tailor, and being suddenly angry with him on that account I probably spoke much more openly to him than I would otherwise have done. «Certainly not, and anyway that's no business of yours. As it happens, I'm a fashion artist. And as it also happens, while we're talking about it, I don't think I've seen a naked male body as good as yours anywhere in Nice.»

He was considerably taken aback, I could see, but also pleased, there was no doubt of that. I could swear that deep under his sun tan something like a schoolboy's blush came and went. «Oh really, well... I don't know about that. Er — thank you,» was all he said, very hesitantly.

»And that being so,» I carried on, «I think it would be a good thing if you came and earned a pound or two modelling for me, this very afternoon. Will you?»

«Well, I'm going to sunbathe here all day,» he said after some thought, «but I could come in the evening if you like.» And so we settled it. I gave him the address and walked quickly away, glad to bring this odd encounter to a fairly dignified close.

*

The flat I rented was in a modern building back in the Old Town, and I was quite prepared — it so often happens with models — for him to get cold feet and not turn up at all; but he did, and punctually too. He was very simply and smartly dressed in a brick-red T-shirt, close fitting black gabardine trousers and red espadrilles. I could price his clothes to the nearest shilling (though I couldn't price the marvellous catlike body inside them to the nearest thousand pounds!); I even noted the flaw in the weave under one arm of his T-shirt which meant he had bought it cheap in a sale. But he wore these very ordinary garments like a prince in ermine, bearing out the theory I have always held, that young men with really good figures needn't waste their money on having clothes made to measure — they look their best in the plainest, massproduced clothes.

On the spur of the moment I decided to take him out to supper at a restaurant round the corner; he accepted the invitation gladly. Watching a healthy young man satisfying his hunger is for me one of the subtlest of pleasures, and I saw to it that he enjoyed himself in the process. Indeed *soupe aux poissons*, a truffle omelette and a Chateaubriand steak for the two of us, of which he ate at least three quarters, with some ordinary rough Beaujolais left us both feeling better. He didn't talk much but seemed to be quite at ease that way. I learnt he was a law student in London; but law being a subject I myself find boring and unreal, I couldn't bring myself to listen much to what he said. He'd been holidaying in Nice with a fellow student on a cheap nightflight excursion from London; two nights before, when they were due to return, there had been only one seat left on the plane, and his friend had taken it, leaving him to follow

later when there was room. The beach shorts had been a 21st birthday present from an American friend.

Back in the flat I said to him «I want you posed 100% stripped, you understand. Not a stitch of anything.»

«Yes, boss,» he grinned back, half out of his shirt already. «It's not the first time, you know.»

«No, I suppose not.» Naked, he was divine — there is no other word. Hard trained, slim and streamlined for action like a young panther, his body yet bore the last traces of the softness and bloom of boyhood, adding roundness and ripeness to his limbs; and the cheeky twinkle in his dark eyes was pure *boy*. As he stood casually in front of me as if in doubt about my approval, I had to keep my hands very firmly behind my back and turn away my eyes to avoid being dazzled by so triumphant a personification of all I admired in a young man. I knew it would be all right when he was posed and I'd entered into the formal, artist-model, working relationship with him; but for the moment I simply couldn't trust myself to go on looking at him. I ought to have learnt to control my desires by now, I'm sure; but it just wasn't so.

He took matters into his own hands. «Come on, I'll go and sit out here. O. K? The light'll be better.» And so saying he strode out onto the balcony, snatched up a cushion and settled himself down on the right hand parapet. His instinct was right — we had gone on eating too long, so the day light had begun to fade, and by a miracle there was no one using the balconies of either of the two flats next to mine. He sat with his right foot up on the parapet, his left down on the floor, his hands together on his right knee, and his face turned slightly to the right looking out over the darkening city. Professionally I have to work fast in all sorts of lights and was not as much worried by the unorthodox conditions as a better artist would probably have been; but I thanked my stars he wasn't a «talker», so that I could concentrate hard on getting that lovely peach-like young body down onto the paper to the best of my ability.

When I next looked through at the clock in the main room, more than an hour had passed. He had not moved once. I said, «Come on, you'd better have a rest now, or you'll fall off the balcony, and I wouldn't like that.»

«Well, thanks, perhaps I will.» And then I had my next and greatest surprise from this somewhat surprising young man. He continued after a moment, quite unaffectedly and openly, «Shall we go to bed together? I'd like to.»

There are moments in one's life when it is better neither to think nor speak, but just to take a big jump. Without a word I went in front of him to the door of the inner room and simply held it open for him to pass in. — — —

Later I lay relaxed and happy on my back, watching the rising moon creep across the ceiling. The young man still lay on his front at my side, moved his arm across my waist and nuzzled his face round onto my chest so that I could feel the tickle of his eyelashes on my skin. Our intimacy seemed to have released something in him and he began to talk much more freely — not straight off as I give it here, but easily and quietly, in fits and starts just as the ideas came to him: —

«Of course I was hopping mad when I looked back out of the sea this morning and saw you messing about with my shorts. I covered the distance pretty quick, I can tell you, but then when I got to you, I didn't really know what to say, in a foreign country and all that. Actually I've had the same thing

happen to me before in swimming baths sometimes — is it a fetish, or a recognized way of picking a fellow up or something? — but they've always been the most fearful dire types I wouldn't be seen dead with. On the other hand, in spite of everything, I rather liked the look of you — still do, you know, even from this angle, those square shoulders are quite something, and you're certainly strong — and when you looked me straight in the eye and just stood your ground, I didn't know if I was on my head or my heels, though I was certainly glad to find you were English. And then straight away all that flash talk about my body — being as vain as hell, I suppose I fell for that at once. You know, you ought to go into politics or something, a chap like you who speaks up just how you think without apologizing or excuses — we'd all follow you, or my lot would anyway. You can't think what a change it was from the usual shifty, cringing pass I usually get made at me.

«But oh dear when the queers decide to lay seige to me more in earnest. Either it's a long talk about ancient Greece and naked youths wrestling all oiled and glistening in the sun — wonderful, I'm sure, but I'm alive today not 2000 years ago, and I know quite a bit about wrestling, a dirty business not how they describe it at all; last year I took on a pro wrestler of my own weight just for fun as I thought, and I was fighting for my life at once, he all but broke my back for me — no poetry there, I can assure you. Or else they do their best to make me tight, but I'm in good training and can drink most people of any age under the table. Or else they pull out «feelthy» postcards which I'm supposed to enjoy. Oh dear, those postcards, pity me please having to look at them so as not to offend people. — I'm certainly no angel, as they say, but if I was they'd put me off sex for years and years and have just the opposite effect to what is meant — you'd be surprised how often they are tried on me.

«Another great thing about you — never once today have you referred to me as a boy — such bloody sentimental nonsense. I'm *not* a boy — I'm twenty two and a full grown man, and I hope I look it and behave like it. Do I? Thanks. Let me tell you, when I came up to this flat after our supper I was so pleased about this I made myself a vow that if you lasted out the first hour of our modelling without ever calling me «my dear boy» or anything silly like that, I would take my courage in both hands and make the first suggestion to you myself. Of course I didn't reckon with the fact that you were so intent on your work you never spoke a word to me at all! But a vow's a vow — so here we are . . .»

I don't doubt he said a great deal more as well, but by that time, exhausted and happy, I was asleep.

*

When I woke, in the cold of the dawn, a third surprise — he was gone. I found a note on the table in full round writing — in which even at that unholy hour I noticed with half my mind the long descending y's and g's which graphologists say are the sign of strong sexuality. It read:

2.0. a.m.

«Something tells me I'll get on that plane tonight, so I've decided to run out to the airport on the off chance. Thanks a lot for everything. When you get to London ring HOL 73430 before 9.30 and ask for Andrew. Good-bye.

P.S. I can't do much to repay you but here is a sort of souvenir of today for you.»

«Run out to the airport» indeed, I thought — well, one is only young once. And reading the third sentence I realized we neither of us even knew each other's name — it had just never arisen. Nor, I suddenly remembered, had the word love ever been mentioned between us.

By the side of the note lay his white beach shorts. I put them on, and trying to imagine they conveyed to me some of the grace of their owner, I lay down and slept again till late.

On Being Friendly in Bars

One of the more curious manifestations in the gay world is the widely differing opinions held about the value of a convivial attitude in gay bars. This fluctuates all the way from those who will be friendly to anyone who is not tedious or downright repulsive, to those who will cut short any overtures of conversation from anyone who does not excite a physical response in them.

There are people who dread going alone to a gay bar for fear that no one at all will speak to them and who will enter such an establishment only in the company of others. This often precludes any opportunity for meeting strangers — unless the companion-protector perceives his presence may be nipping romance short and tactfully absents himself; but it does protect the sensitive from the pang of rejection.

There are those who are suspicious of meeting anyone who is not introduced by some third party who presumably thereby vouches for them, and who will not even pursue an interesting chance contact which may be made through the greater conviviality of their accompanying friends.

There are also the snobs who do not wish to accept, even on a platonic friendly basis, someone who is not authenticated for them as belonging to the social level of the gay world they wish to inhabit. These people have a compulsion to belong to a in-group and keep everyone else out of it.

There are those who are not even looking for companionship of any sort. They have come to the bar because they would rather drink «in company», than alone at home. Sometimes they are happily married and think it unfairly misleading to permit someone to play a hopeless gambit with them, even buy drinks for them, under the false assumption that they are available. Sometimes they are recovering from a bitter romantic experience and do not wish to expose themselves to another, or even a careless adventure in overnight libidinal escape. They want to brood.

There are also those who have come out of curiosity to «case the joint». They have heard about this bar, but as this is their first acquaintance with its atmosphere and clientele, they are leery of encouraging encounters. They do not yet feel enough at home in the place to let down their hair to the habitués.

The difficulty is that none of these individuals wear little buttons of various colors which identify their state of mind. Consequently many yearnings are wasted, many overtures are made in vain and many hearts are stabbed by sudden, unaccountable departures which seem to be in the nature of rejections although they actually may not be explicitly so.