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Giddy Youth and Grim Age

by Hadrian

The bittersweet comedy of manners between the young and the less young in the special demi-monde we are studying is not too different from the same comedy as it is played out in «square» circles. It is always true that youth cannot look forward to an age it never expects to reach, nor can age look back accurately on a youth it may not regain. In the straight world youth seems just as thoughtless, frivolous and cruel («Who cares about old fuddy-dufs over thirty?») as it does in the gay world, and similarly does normal maturity seem unalluring, tiresome and ridiculous, even pathetic to the young.

It is a true question which is the harder period for the gay: adolescence or middle age. The fires and agonies of adolescence seem unbearable while they are being endured, for there is no equanimity, no philosophy, no objectivity to be found, or perhaps even to be desired at that period of life. As a youth, one burns to live, and, whether one *lives* or not, one surely burns. Panic, guilt, hopeless passion, and desperate frustration rend the souls of the sensitive young. The less sensitive, if petted too much, become spoiled, insincere, calculating and hideously given over to Narcissism. One shudders to think what the adjustment to middle age will be for these Venetian glass nephews of the mid-twentieth century; growing older is hard enough to accept for those who have never considered themselves to be «real dolls,» but for those who have—*quel torment!*

Particularly must this prove true today in this era of «the little queen», for so many little queens actually are little, have little bodies and little faces; one hesitates to sadden one's imagination with the image of what odd little mannequins some of today's precious ones will be when they are in their forties and their littleness is no longer «cute» but now weird. To be an old «little queen» may mean to become a freak.

At a recent informal forum held by more mature experts, various voices expressed the notion that today's debutantes are blighted by a neuroticism based upon materialism and a strong resistance to the romantic. One veteran stated that when he had been young, he had lived in a cold water flat with a bed and two chairs, accompanied by his beloved, and they had been happy, but that today's young New Yorkers cannot be happy unless they are dwelling in an East Side apartment with air-conditioning and wall-to-wall carpeting. In his opinion the giddy youth of today have sold their gay birthright to romance for a mercenary mess of chi-chi pottage.

Another voice expressed the belief that the fruity ones between twenty and twenty-five are betraying themselves, hoisting themselves on their own petard by their ridiculous snobbery and pretentiousness, that, in point of fact, they are all complaining that they do not «make out»; it is his theory that they cannot understand why, with all their trimness and good looks, they go home alone so often of an evening.

One wonders if this is a change belonging to an era, or if it was ever thus. In gay life the young are apt to be more finicky and less practical than their elders. Once this may have been from romanticism; but today it may result from too calculating an ambition. The young have a tendency to look with disdain at what they damn as the «promiscuous» behaviour of their adults, a behaviour to which they are sure *they* will never abase themselves. They are

quite willing to be entertained by the elderly (anyone over thirty is «elderly» in their eyes), to be plied with food and drink and, above all, flattery, but in their arrogantly aspiring young hearts perhaps they despise the warm, hospitable «aunt» who is treating them. Why? For no other reason than the simple one that the years have taken their toll and they can see that, even if said «aunt» has money, he does not have that priceless jewel they possess: youth.

Their enchantment with their own youth often blinds the gay young of today to other factors of personality. They think youth is enough, and they may behave any way they like if they have youth. It is a bitter discovery to learn that their youth is *not* enough in the eyes of all beholders. They imagine it should be. Annoyed at this contretemps, they become more giddy, scream more persistently and cling together more frantically, fearful of rejection. They select a sex partner who is plain or odd and whose physique is far from notable solely because he is also young; whereas they will forego an older partner who is more decorative of face, more attractive of body, more wise in the ways of love, but who is not willing to make a humble fool of himself, spending money on them because they are young and he is not. They will take an inept and untrained lover who fails to be very satisfying, who may be a bundle of maladjustments, because he is young, in preference to a mature partner who might teach them the meaning of emotion, and give them greater pleasure and greater wisdom.

Their awareness of youth cuts through light and darkness, make-up, costuming, everything. Even in the black shadows along Faggot's Walk, a youth can still descry that another form is either young or not so young. No matter how slim some older «belle» may still contrive to be, the lines of youth are somehow not there. He may have kept his body in fine shape, kept it as young as it can possibly be for its actual years, but however lithe that body be, it is still *not* a young body, and true youth perceives this at a glance, even in the darkest night.

Youth is sometimes drawn to age rather than to youth, but this is less apt to happen in outdoor cruising places or even in gay bars, than it is in private social rendezvous. In such open places of assignation, direct sensuality of young appearance is paramount. Youth is quick to scorn the lack of it.

But if youth can meet age in more glamorous surroundings, in some setting where the older partner is able to display qualities that do not register distinctly in gay bars—such as charm, kindness and grace, then perhaps youth will succumb. But such qualities of spirit require a less competitive, less clique-conscious atmosphere than that of Lenny's or The Annex.

The middle-aged charmer (and every man over thirty-five is definitely middle-aged to the young, whether he faces this himself or not) should preferably be met at the opera when he is glistening in evening clothes, or at a cocktail party where he is holding a group amused by his wit and good humour, or at a lawn fête, immaculate in summer finery. Then a middle-aged person, even one as senile as fifty, can be «that fascinating older man» and can exert a magic partly because he *is* older, more knowledgeable and better able to hold his own socially. But—remove this identical figure to a different setting and conceal his identity—then a sad story of rebuff is bound to occur.

Unfortunately, all middle-aged faggots are not in an economic position to let themselves be seen only in lustrous settings where their assets can be advantageously displayed. They are very often financially restricted by low salaries

and perhaps family burdens. They do not have clothes from *Town and Country*, gold wristwatches and handsome roadsters with imported bodies. Their only way of meeting other gay people may be to come into a bar just as they do: in commonplace clothes, anonymous figures of deterioration.

The cruel fact is that Nature does not let go of them. Few of these men can say to themselves, «I have had my kicks and now I am content to sit back and be a dignified spectator of the revels.» Nature persists in lashing them on to achieve sexual release at the cost of a loss of dignity, probably a loss of money. It is dismal enough to watch them in bars, but far worse it is to encounter them in Turkish baths, walking about in ghastly nudity like the nightmare figures in *Los Caprichos* of Goya. One is saddened, one may shudder at one's own future, but one does not consent.

Youth, of course, jeers, for youth has not yet learned compassion. But a sensitive person who has passed out of first youth into a period between youth and middle age may sometimes feel a pang of sympathy for these tortured souls.

A gay man is likely to pass through a strange valley somewhere in his thirties, when he ceases to have the same life he did as a young blade. He is haunted by the Old Wives' Tale that once he reaches forty, he will be done for, and can win no one to his arms without money. He can be told that after this interim of the thirties he will move into another and just as active phase of life, but he will not believe it. One can only state, incredible as it seems, that there *are* people who make out better in their forties than they did in their thirties; they acquire a different patina, a different sort of charm, and sing their September Song more sweetly than they sang «*June Is Bustin' Out All Over.*» But without the aid of filthy lucre's magnetic power, this will not happen to them if they allow themselves to become bitter, waspish and morbid; only if they manage to retain a kind of outgoing sunniness of disposition.

Still and all, even the successful among the more mature must count on a certain percentage of failure. No matter how determined an effort they make to preserve their bodies in presentable form, by dieting and by exercise, they will fail with many. They may still have bodies that are quite pleasing to the eye—bodies without blemishes, bodies without masses of hair, bodies without wrinkles, folds and scars, and in the summer they may keep these bodies goldenly tanned; but all this will do no good a great deal of the time because of the fact that above their bodies are their heads, and their heads reveal that they are over forty. They must realize that some younger man whose skin is speckled with moles or pinked with pimples, who has unsightly hairs on his back, who has unbecoming extra fat around his midriff, bowed legs or acne, may yet spirit away the prize for which they yearned in vain.

To the mature this seems ruthless; to the young it seems natural.

In some, of course, this crisis of age arises earlier than in others. Nature ages some people sooner by depriving them of the hair on their heads, or by loading them with fat on their bellies, so that they look to be fifty when they are only thirty-five. Others may prolong a semblance of youngness, with luck, for ten years beyond the average.

One of the most maddening figures in the gay world to many, both to the young and the equally old, is the «belle» of ripe years who has still a youthful figure and a youthful aura, who can glide into a gay bar or a cocktail party and, instead of fighting frantically to «make out», be the very one who is sought after by others, who makes prompt arrangements and departs with his

trophy, on an occasion when even some of the most ducky youths go home alone. At such moments, the rival «queens» *d'un certain âge* and the defeated youths have a frightful longing to scream out to the victim, «But you don't know what you're doing! You're out of your mind. That man is forty-seven. He's an old bag!».

But the dread day does come when even these prolonged Peter Pans must face their true semblance and admit the brutal fact that their day is done; they have stretched things out beyond the average span for themselves, but now The Time Has Come.

Fame or money may, of course, compensate for the absence of youth and aid them in finding partners. A famous older man can throw opportunities in the way of a younger man. This often occurs in Europe, where an older person of talent, especially in France, is venerated for his talent. Money can operate in the same way if the older person is willing to keep the younger one. But in these instances there generally exists a canker sore of wounded pride in the soul of the older person. He fears, he *knows*, he is not loved for himself. He is convinced that he is worthy to be loved for himself; he feels that he has more warmth, more sweetness, maybe even more passion to offer than some cold-blooded little sexpot—and this is quite possibly true in certain cases, but it still cannot obliterate the brutal fact of his age. He is buying something he longs to have for free, and it is bitter to have to buy.

This observer watched such a story acted out between a young actor and an old socialite. The old socialite offered a penthouse apartment and strawberries and champagne for breakfast. The young actor lusted after such glories. Finding that he could not twist this younger observer around his egotistical little finger, he departed for the Lake Shore penthouse; but, encountered at a debutante party two months later, he whispered huskily, «Come back, little Sheba.» It can also be bitter to be *bought*.

Alas, in an era such as ours in which Money is Everything and Romance is Nothing, these lessons cannot be taught, only learned directly.

There are exceptional cases where such alliances do not occur either from greed for luxury or professional ambition; but they require in the young man a sense of values which is rare in the giddy youths of our materialistic era.

If it were possible to make youth foresee and age recall, we would not have so many hostilities between parents and children. For just the same reason, we fear that the mature and the juvenile in the gay world are rarely able to understand each other. Each is intolerant of the other's aims and values.

Age, for all its usual loss of pulchritude, is easier to bear than the pains of youth. Life hurts less poignantly because with age more equanimity has been learned. Yes, age also contains many blows to the amour propre, but, still, it is a more tranquil period in which the quality called *peace of mind* can be secured to one degree or another. Age should think of this with a certain measure of gratification when tempted to think dolefully, «Ah, youth, youth!»

Perhaps the best policy for age would be to bear in mind a line from a minor film called «Age of Violence» in which that usually patrician actress, Mary Astor, played the part of a prostitute. On finding herself in a jam which required her to leave for new fields, she was seen in her room, winding up her heating pad to pack it away, saying, «Oh, well, what the hell! I've had my kicks!»