

The triangle

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THE TRIANGLE

by O. F. Simpson

These events belong to the time when I was in my early twenties and had only recently come up to London to «make my way in the world». Being poor, as most young men are, I used to turn my hobby, photography, to some account and add to my meagre income by being a physique photographer in the evenings and at weekends; also in various other similar ways, such as modelling nude for art schools (without exception the hardest money I have ever earned in my whole life) and selling to other models a special type of minimum posing strap for men which I had designed myself.

It was to buy one of these latter that Philip first wrote to me from some country town about 50 miles from London. He ordered one in bright red «for danger», which showed me that at least he had a sense of humour, and I soon learnt more about him from his letters: he was 20, an apprentice engineer, keen on cycling and swimming, also on wrestling which, he said, all the members of his «gang» used to practise in the evenings. It further emerged that he had a pen-pal in America who had asked him for his photo—so would I take it for him? I said I would, and we organised for him to come up to London one Saturday evening in August for this purpose.

Up till that day I had almost always been 100% disappointed in the young men who wrote to me out of the blue asking to have their photo taken: they turned out in the flesh to be usually completely ordinary, with a much exaggerated idea of their own good looks and physiques. Indeed I had already decided, money or no money, that Philip was to be my last blind experiment in this direction—after him I would photograph only young men by invitation, handpicked by myself.

But fortunately Philip was a surprise—he had a stocky, sturdy body, like most English boys with his bottom and legs better developed than his chest and arms; he had a high colour, straight fair hair in a golliwog fringe down over his forehead, and a slow, rather engaging, countryman's smile.

Well, we were both young, and after I'd taken the photos of him in his little strap he showed no signs of wanting to get dressed again, so I suggested he should wrestle me a bit, and I stripped too. He did not look specially muscular, but turned out to be stronger and a more skilful wrestler than I expected, so that I was fairly well extended trying to tame him; he fought me hard all the time, laughing and giggling, and of course it wasn't long before we both didn't want it to be a fight any longer. I carried him over to my bed, and lay down beside him. He was a deeply passionate boy. I don't need to describe in detail how we spent the next fifteen minutes, how splendid for us both everything was, and the gentle aftermath as we lay quietly in each other's arms, until...

It was the sound which must so often have struck terror into secret lovers the whole world over—the turning of a latchkey in the frontdoor lock. I just had time to whisper to Philip to nip off to the bathroom and get dressed, before Martin was inside the bedroom door, looking down with amazement and horror at what he saw.

I must here digress to introduce Martin to you—the young man with whom I shared the flat, since living alone in London was prohibitively expensive for the young then as it is now. Martin was a schoolfriend of long standing, tall, dark, lean, handsome as a Red Indian, athletic (the high-jump was his speciality)

with a very strong personality which I had greatly admired as a boy, and I was still under his spell. He was one of the few people I knew who was always entirely sure of himself, knew exactly where he was going in life, how to behave in any situation, a bit severe, correct, polite, always admirable. He was training to be a barrister (and is now a famous one). Why he liked me I have no idea, since I am by nature shy, rebellious and erratic; but I suppose these qualities, so much the opposite of his own, gave him scope for those feelings of restrained disapproval and superiority which are often the basis of lasting friendships—he needed someone to show off by contrast his own excellent qualities, and this someone had for many years been me. I had never been really intimate with him, but somehow we had come to be used to each other, and happy together.

At least I was never afraid to argue with him, and I think he liked sharpening his wits on me: one of the never-ending arguments we had was about my physique photography. Martin said he thought photographing a boy naked differed only in degree from raping him, and that to pay him for the use of his body in photos—as I always made a point of doing—was turning him into a prostitute into the bargain. I used to reply that this seemed to be taking a rather extreme view; that you might as well say that policemen and lawyers actually caused crime, since without their elaborately organised system for bringing criminals to justice there might be no crime at all. I never told him how near the mark he actually was—how many boys, after being photographed, used to offer me their bodies, either openly (which I preferred as being more honest) or with thinly veiled hints. Anyway the arguments we had together were many, and, as with young men, often rather heated.

Well, Martin was supposed to be out that evening altogether, but there he suddenly was in the doorway, sizzling with anger, and the situation had to be coped with. One look at the mussed-up bedclothes, at me naked on the bed, at Philip also naked with his hand on the handle of the inner door, was enough to tell him everything.

He tackled Philip first, with a flying kick across the boy's arse which shot him through into the bathroom. «Get along, you filthy young punk—go and get dressed and out of here double quick!»

He slammed the door and turned to me. «Well?»

«Well what?»

«What have you got to say for yourself? What do you mean by turning this place into a brothel?»

«Don't be a bloody fool. Anyway what about you saying you're going to be out, and then coming back without a word?»

«Can't I come and go even in my own flat?» Unfortunately since he paid most of the rent, it was indeed mainly his flat, although for some reason—partly connected I think with an ascetic streak in his character—I was allowed to occupy the best bedroom in it.

And so we slashed away at each other, until looking at the bedside clock I suddenly realised that time had flown; I would have to get dressed at once, as I had a photographing date down in the suburbs within half an hour. Martin had cooled down slightly, though only slightly, and I told him we'd talk properly when I got back; then I looked into the bathroom where young Philip was taking his time, soaping himself unconcernedly in the bath, and just gave

me a wide, radiant smile when I told him I'd have to be off at once. He just said «O.K., I guess I can look after myself. I'll write you. Thanks for it all.»

I snatched up my camera and lights, and a few props, hurried out without another word to Martin, who was doing something in the kitchen, bundled the lot into the «Meteor»—the aged Baby Austin, held together mostly with string, which was all we could afford by way of a car—and off to Putney, where I arrived only a quarter of an hour late. It was a man who wanted his negro-friend photographed in his presence, and I did a good job of it. Negroes were not then as plentiful in London as they are now; this one, though he had never posed seriously before, was a natural model, not much of a face perhaps, but relaxed by temperament, easy and a pleasure to photograph. The only trouble, I remember, was getting the camera work started at all: the man took so long massaging every inch of the boy's magnificent coffee-coloured body with oil, till he shone like polished mahogany all over, and both of them got such a kick out of this process that it was nearly half an hour before I could start the poses at all. The session took at least 2½ hours and it was nearly 10.0 when I started for home again.

I called in a pub on the way for beer and a sandwich, and found when I came out that poor old Meteor, which really was on its last legs, had suddenly decided to refuse its favours entirely—not a flicker of any kind from the engine though I cranked and self-started like mad. More delay, while I telephoned a garage and waited for the repair truck to arrive; it was the ignition coil at fault, and they produced a new one for me, but it was 11.30 before I at last got home, tired and angry at the prospect of further bickering with Martin who I imagined would be waiting up for me, ready to start nagging away again.

There was just a hope Martin might have got tired of waiting and gone to bed himself—worth acting on anyway; so I tiptoed into the flat and straight to my own bedroom, where I opened the door without a sound. Looking back now, I can see that the sight which met my eyes was rather a beautiful one; but at the time I felt only a hot surge of rage, astonishment and plain jealousy. The bedside light was still on, and I saw this: Philip sprawled asleep on his back and Martin lying across him, his back bare, and the rest of him under the sheet no doubt bare also, his arm crooked back across Philip's chest, his tousled long black hair mingled with Philip's on the pillow, his lips still within an inch or two of the boy's open mouth. It was, as I say, for those who are responsive to the loves of young men, no doubt a tender, charming and affecting picture; for me at the time it was a maddening one. I was carrying in my hand a native spear—one of the props used for photographing the negro—and with this I had a moment's savage pleasure launching a sharp jab at Martin's right buttock so temptingly outlined for me under the sheet. With a howl of pain he woke, woke Philip in the process, took a moment or two to recollect where he was, and then... but this time I was the one in command of the situation. I played it as matter-of-factly as I could, ignoring Martin altogether.

«Come on, boy,» I said to Philip. «Get dressed. I'm going to take you home—they'll be wondering where you've got to.» They, I had learnt earlier, was in fact an elderly aunt in West London with whom he was staying the night. Martin, modestly holding a towel round his middle, disappeared sheepishly into his own bedroom.

In the car Philip told me something of what had happened after I had left. Martin had come to the bathroom and actually apologised for being so rough

earlier. He had made Philip stay to supper and cooked him the biggest steak he had ever seen—and I knew how good Martin's cooking was, he never did anything he didn't do wholeheartedly and well. During supper Martin had talked most of the time about me, how that I was bit wild and silly, but open-hearted and generous to a fault: «he said you were the best friend a chap like me could have, and of course I told him I thought so too.» Once more Philip flashed one of his delightful wide, sunny smiles at me.

All this astounded me, since Martin had never said anything of the kind to me himself—his attitude was always one of slightly playful big-brotherly patronage (he was in fact four years older than me); and so my ears began to burn a bit. But by that time of night my brain was completely addled and I couldn't begin to puzzle it out; nor had Philip time to tell me much of what had happened after supper, except that Martin had started rather awkwardly to make very rough love to him on the sofa in front of the fire... at which point we reached our destination. I had to switch on my charming-young-man act to overcome what I was sure would be the aunt's natural resentment at her nephew arriving back so late. Fortunately she was a kind old soul, with no idea of time at all, who just said, «He'd told me such a lot about you, and I knew he'd be all right with you.» Then she sat us down to a goodnight cup of tea and home-made cake—more delay. What Philip must have thought about the goings-on in London, after his first day's experiences in the big city, I had no idea; but he was still his fresh-faced, friendly, unruffled self when I left the house, after making all sorts of plans to meet again. (He is now an up-and-coming, highly respectable civil engineer with a large practice and a large family.)

In the end it was nearly one o'clock in the morning before I got home again. I looked first into Martin's room and was heartily glad to hear the sound of heavy breathing which meant he was asleep; I certainly was in no mood for any more quarrels or recriminations. It was a damp, hot night and I was too exhausted to do more myself than strip and slide naked under a single sheet without further delay. I lay awake for a bit, but dozed off in the end; one doesn't lie awake long at twenty-two.

I don't know how long I slept. It was still in the timeless dark of night that through waves of sleep I felt the sheet twitched aside across my body, some cooler air let in, and an arm—I was hardly conscious but I knew it was Martin's arm—stealing round my waist. Naked as I was, he snuggled down close at my side, one hand holding me, the other rumpling my hair; and drowsily I folded his hard, sinewy, panther's body in my arms with a great sigh of delight. I knew the barriers were at last down between us, and would never be raised again. Still through the mists of sleep I heard his bantering whisper in my ear:

«Hey, Freddy boy, you disgusting young homo, this is what you want, isn't it?»

It was. It was what we both wanted, more than anything in the world.