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IN LOCO PARENTIS

by O. F. SIMPSON

I was both lucky and unlucky with Mike Salter—lucky to have had access to him at all, unlucky in that the special position in which I stood with regard to him debarred me from the kind of relationship I should have tried to develop with any other boy as attractive. He came to me when he was thirteen and just going to his public school in England: my flat in London was to be his home for the Christmas and Easter holidays, and his base for the long summer holidays which he flew out to spend with his parents in the West Indies. His father, a waterworks engineer, was an old schoolfriend whom I much admired, his mother I had known almost as long and admired as much; so that when they asked me to look after their precious Mike, an only son and the apple of their eye, I was deeply pleased and complimented to be trusted in that way.

When he first came, he was a slim little wisp of a boy, a lean face with large grey eyes, a wide, generous mouth, and a quiff of stiff black curls over his forehead. Almost unnaturally polite and on his best behaviour, every other remark he made carried with it a smile, as if he wanted to make sure it would go over well. In general he treated life as one huge incredible joke, scarcely to be taken seriously by any sensible boy; his reserves of nervous energy were terrific—to toughen him up I used to take him for all-night cycle rides and other adventures of that kind, till I was mortified to find that they tired him much less than they did me. A cheerful, rather mocking, affectionate friendship grew up quickly between us, more brotherly than anything else; and I found myself looking forward more and more to the times he was due to spend with me.

Like most teenagers, he rapidly went through a bewildering series of crazes—of which much the least agreeable was the six months at the age of sixteen while he was determined to become a famous jazz trumpeter, and I had to use all my diplomatic skill with the neighbours to get them to turn a deaf ear to the hideous row of Mike practising. Though he liked dancing, and was friendly with a succession of different girls, there were no permanent attachments in that line—he was never in one place long enough. Really his only peculiarity was the huge sums he always spent on his clothes, the detailed thought he constantly gave to them, and the quite exceptional pleasure one could give him by a well-chosen gift of exactly the right pullover, tie or swim-slip. Still, if that was his only peculiarity, I was lucky, I thought.

So the years passed. He got rather a good degree at Cambridge after which while studying at a college of technology in London he came to live with me more or less whole time. At 23 he still looked no more than 16; and the fact that he had grown up only came home to me suddenly one hot holiday afternoon in Norfolk, as I found myself considering the detail of his ripening body flopped face down on a towel at my side to dry in the sun after a swim. It was still the body I had always known, but there were new cords of muscle along his shoulders and arms, bold new curves on his thighs and calves. He wore the special tiny tight green nylon slip that I had combed France to find as a present for him: disappearing into the dark between his coffee-brown legs, it threw into delicious prominence the twin footballs of his perfect young athlete's buttocks. In a flash I perceived for the first time that here was no longer a boy but a young man, ready for love and life as well as mere affection, and that I desired him strongly; but I was still held back consciously by what had

always restrained me unconsciously all the years I had known him—the feeling that he had been presented to me only on trust, and that it would be irresponsible, and unfair to the parents who had shown me their confidence, to give rein to my homo tendencies in any way where he was concerned. Well at any rate, I thought with a sigh, I'm close to him and shall be the first to notice if anything ever develops in his own changing nature which would excuse me approaching him in this way.

I was wrong.

My London flat is a small, cramped one, in which, to reach the bathroom at all, you have to go through the small inner bedroom which Mike occupied. Coming back early one day from the office, I saw a letter with an embossed coronet on the envelope lying face downwards on his dressing table. I won't bother you with my agonies and hesitations before I finally decided I was responsible for the boy and therefore entitled to read it. It was a bad thing to do, but I did it. Inside, on scented paper, I found a fantastic 5-page letter, signed «John»—the first few pages taken up with absurdly lyrical praise and flattery («young Apollo—dreamlike ephebe of ancient Greece»—all that sort of thing) and the last two with a long string of out-and-out obscenities, of a kind which made even a hardened old sinner like me rub my eyes: if there were men who really thought that way about handsome boys, well, I began to think, there might be something to be said for repressive legislation.

After supper that night, I asked Mike who John was.

«John who?» — «You know.»

He stared unbelievingly. Then quite calmly, «Do you mean to tell me you've been reading my letters?»

«I'm responsible for you here.»

«Fred»—he was terribly fierce and serious and dignified as only the young can be—«please apologize to me straight away for doing anything so dead mean and awful as reading a fellow's letters. Straight away, please.»

I blustered a bit, but he won. There's nothing in life so necessary to me as the respect and affection of handsome youths. I apologized, very awkwardly.

«Well, that's O.K.» he replied almost jauntily. John, it appeared, was a Hungarian Count Mike had met at a party and visited several times in his Park Lane flat. «He likes me, you know.»

«I don't want you ever to see him again.»

«Don't be stuffy—I'm over 21 and can see whoever I like.»

«You can, you can. All I'm saying is I'd rather you didn't. You can't think he really meant all that muck he wrote to you?»

«Well, he wrote it, didn't he? And perhaps I might know him better than you do, don't you think?»

My position was a weak one—he was indeed over 21—so I made one last effort. «Please don't make a fool of yourself, Mike. I don't think John's the sort of chap your father would approve of, in fact I'm certain he isn't.»

«Thanks for nothing. I'll see who I like. And please leave my father out of it. You're not him.»

*

I decided I ought to «turn in to the attack» and visit this Hungarian count myself one day, if count he was. So in an old yellow pullover and really dirty jeans I argued my way one afternoon past the long chain of idling porters, lift-

men, parlourmaids and other lackeys of the rich—a useless section of humanity which I despise and dislike almost as much as they despise and dislike me—and finally found myself in a flat high up above Hyde Park, with my host sitting on the sofa in front of me, and Mozart's Jupiter symphony on the radio. He never even rose.

«I am Mike Salter's guardian,» I began, much too selfconsciously, «and have come to talk to you about him . . .»

In quiet, silky tones he interrupted: «Yes, he has told me a lot about you. You are exceedingly good-looking and have a fine physique. I can see that any boy would make a man like you his hero. Mike is lucky.»

This piece of unashamed flattery succeeded in taking the wind somewhat out of my sails. «I have to warn you . . .»

«But please remember,» he continued evenly as if I hadn't spoken, «that Mike can choose his own friends. I am lucky that he has also chosen me for his intimacy. He is a dear boy.»

«Look, if I thought for one half second it had ever been more than just talk between you—that you had ever tasted him—I'd break both your arms for you straight away, snap, like that, see? And if you ever touch him in the future, I'll come and do it just the same, don't worry.»

He was quite unmoved. «Well, you'll never know, will you? Mike won't tell you anyway. In any case, he doesn't need protection, I can assure you. And now» —he turned to the radio and increased the volume slightly—«will you please leave me? I have lost interest in you. You English are so ridiculously clumsy, like big dogs.»

«Well, you know now who you are dealing with.»

«I am dealing with Mike. You do not interest me, for all your big muscles and your silly cowboy clothes. Will you now please go?» He spoke sharply for the first time, and in the end I had to withdraw, with all the dignity I could muster, since there was no more to say.

*

Two weeks later, one day I again returned by chance early from my work, and when I went through to the back room the sight that met my eyes was astonishing indeed. On tiptoe in front of the long mirror, legs apart, hands lightly on his hips, entirely nude, but covered from head to foot in glistening silver paint, stood Mike; round his parts, under the paint, I could detect a thin posing pouch, and at his feet was a white enamel basin containing the silver mixture and a small sponge for applying it, which he had evidently just finished doing. He seemed excessively pleased with himself, lost in the contemplation of his own shimmering limbs, which gave back the light at full brilliance like a stainless steel statue; and indeed, looking back now, I can see he really was a gloriously beautiful sight. He knew nothing specific about ballet dancing, but with his natural sense of balance and poise and his sinewy, hard trained body absolutely vibrating with health and energy, he could have given points to most ballet dancers. But at the time I couldn't see beyond the ridiculous display of sissy vanity, so, half in love and half in anger, I strode up to him and fetched him a really savage blow with my right hand across his buttocks. Then things began to happen quickly. I had about half a second to enjoy the marvellous hard/soft feeling of a muscular boy's bottom under one's hand when, stung by the pain, he whipped round to face me, and we both saw in the same moment that

the silver paint, or whatever it was, had come off all over the palm of my hand. He was a much quicker thinker than me, and with a wild howl of schoolboy glee he leapt off the ground straight at me, so that I just had to catch him and hold him in my arms to prevent him falling. Methodically and rhythmically—and giggling the whole time—he rubbed his shining front up and down against the front of my best suit, wriggled about so that my arms across his back got their full share of the silver too, and brushed his silver face to and fro across my cheeks; so that within ten seconds my face was all streaked with silver, my best office suit was utterly ruined, and I was cursing the slippery silver eel I held in my arms with every expletive I knew. From start to finish it was nothing but a terrific joke for him, nothing but a complete defeat for me. Then at the end, climbing down off me, he said: «Ah well, I suppose that means another military bath now, what?»

This referred to a sort of ritual I had been used to carrying out with him many years before, when he was 14 or 15, but recently had given up—soaping him very carefully and thoroughly all over with my hands while he stood stiff and still in the bath, with all his muscles tensed like a young soldier. I used to use a special shampoo soap that lathered well, and the slow steady massaging of his nude limbs under the dripping soap foam was as much of a thrill as I would ever allow myself with him. Fearing that it might be too much for my self-control as he got older and more attractive, I had denied myself the pleasure in recent years, and always made some excuse when he asked for it; but to-night I went to it with a will once more. It took us no less than three successive baths before the silver stuff—a formidable mixture of vaseline and powdered aluminium—was out of his ears and his hair and the rest of him. When the fourth bath was ready, I stripped myself and lay in it with him giving him as serious a talking-to as I could get him to take about the business of growing up, and being a man, not a sissy: how I thought that a higher standard of behaviour, not a lower, was to be expected of good-looking boys like him, because things would always be easier for them in the world, and they ought to go further than ordinary boys, and not waste their time prancing about naked in front of mirrors.

It had of course been Count John, I learnt, who had suggested the idea to him, had asked him to go and pose nude for some friends who were going to fire cine cameras at him; «he just said I had the best figure in London, and he wanted his friends to see it,» Mike said innocently, «so I was having quite a nice rehearsal, and it was fun—till you came along, you miserable old killjoy, you.»

I didn't think much of my lecture would have stuck, so when the baths were finally over I took him out to supper, and by nightfall our good-humoured relationship was entirely restored.

*

Only a week later—September 15th—it was his birthday. I delayed giving him my present till the evening and made him open the huge box in front of me in his bedroom. I had taken care over assembling the items, and it was wonderful to watch his absurd and uninhibited excitement as he unwrapped each one and laid it on the bed: new leather calf boots, pale blue jeans torn off short at the top of the thigh, a Mexican bead belt, an Indian broad-brimmed fishing hat, and for good measure (on loan only!) my old service revolver in its holster. The jeans shorts were the masterpiece—very pale blue, washed out denim, and a

size smaller than he usually wore, so that it took him more than a minute of heaving and shoving to get them zipped up at all, and they hugged his middle so tight he could hardly walk. I loved to watch him smilingly and luxuriously smoothing his hands down his long sunbrown thighs, bare from crutch down to the top of his boots; then suddenly leap into action skipping all round the room clicking the revolver trigger like one possessed. I congratulated myself on thinking better of my first idea, which was to load a live round into the revolver to give him the pleasure of firing it: had I done so, it would most probably have ended inside me.

When at last he stopped romping round and paused to take breath, so I could get his attention, I said: «The point is, Mike, if you're going to dress up, I'd rather you did it my way. Do you see?»

«Yes, Fred.» He turned to me with a grin, but couldn't tear himself away from his reflection in the mirror for long. «Two hundred percent smashing kit, isn't it?»

«And are you going to follow me or John in future?»

A pause. A scowl. «Well, I don't see what... ah well, O.K., yes, you fearful old bully, I suppose I love you and all that, and I'll do what you say,» and with those words he turned impulsively and kissed me full on the lips. I remember watching the setting sun glow orange on his bare brown shoulder as I drew him towards me and held him tight.

*

Two nights later, as I was settling into bed, a knock came on the door, and Mike in the «smashing kit», hat, boots and all, grinning all over his face, came into the room. «Look, Fred, I know you're a wicked old hound, I know you make love to boys, I know much more about you than you think, see? I know all about those fellows you have here to sleep with you when I'm not around; I met one of them at a party once, he told me he thought you had me every other night—that shakes you cold, doesn't it?»—it certainly did—«Well what about me sleeping with you tonight—that's to say if I'm good enough for you. You've been terrifically good to me for years, and if you're interested in me—mind you, I don't say you are, or see why you should be—well, come on, show me how, what're we waiting for?»

A row of dots will take care of the next hour—though ideally there should be a sound track as well, because, as I have said, he was a very merry boy and we both laughed a lot together always, and never more than in this supreme moment of intimacy. The business of unzipping and removing those crutchtight blue shorts began the fun...

But the story doesn't end perhaps as beautifully as you might expect. Next morning, as he rolled away from my side to get dressed, Mike said, in a most matter-of-fact tone: «Well thanks, Fred, you were terrific—glad to know what it's all like and no one could have done his stuff better; but actually I didn't enjoy it all that. Perhaps your teaching about being a man has sunk in, or something; obviously girls are much more fun. Don't mind if I don't ever come again will you?»

I mind very much indeed, but I try not to show it.