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A Gentleman's Pleasure

by

James Barr

I cannot speak for my fellow American homosexuals on the Montagu Case in England last March for I do not know what they think of those three unlucky gentlemen who were convicted and imprisoned for having had unnatural relations with two Royal Air Force members. In the first place, other than a few senile titterings from Walter Winchell, a New York columnist with a large, scandal loving following, our newspapers over here gave the case very little space. Secondly, for months at a time, while writing or living in the heart of my family, I am completely isolated from all homosexual contacts other than short business letters to and from publishers on the subject. Such is the case at this time. I speak, therefore, only for myself, and what I've read in the British newspapers.

I believe, with their jury, that Montagu, Wildeblood and probably Pitt-Rivers were guilty as accused in spite of their denials and the logical explanations for their actions. As a homosexual and a writer I have deliberately sought out many people on several social levels other than my own for information and even companionship. Usually intimacies did not occur. Wildeblood was right in saying that writers must know all sorts of people as a part of their trade. That goes almost without saying. He was also correct in stating that some writers, as well as homosexuals, are very lonely people. Why this is true I don't know, but tragically it is. Perhaps, used to manipulating fictional characters as we are, we withdraw from flesh and blood that refuses to be molded as easily to our purposes. This cuts our roster of friends as well as the effectiveness and authenticity of our work dangerously and our loneliness grows by what it feeds on. So far Mr. Wildeblood's excuse for knowing the airmen is acceptable to any unprejudiced jury. Whether or not intimacies occurred is still very much a matter for conjecture at this point in his testimony. But the next point made by the prosecution was a telling one. Why were extremely affectionate letters exchanged by Wildeblood and Airman McNally? Or Montagu, or Pitt-Rivers, and Airman Reynolds? Now I have written love letters that I'd give a lot today to know were beyond the hands of those State employed puppets who officially tear a passion to tatters during such times as the Montagu trial, and to my own possible damnation as well as imprisonment, I must admit that I felt there was a good reason for every expression of affection I set down in writing at the time. Wildeblood's statement that he had been incapable of any physical manifestation of desire for three years makes a good defense against his letters, but it also makes his expressions of tenderness for the serviceman so ironic as to appear ludicrous. Obviously, the prosecution, representing a blue-nosed society, had a fete to the horror of every homosexual who followed the controversy. (And the coincidental appearance of the name, Mc Carthy,

among the inquisitors must have brought forth fresh twinges of revulsion from many present day Americans.)

The situation now must seem to the world to be this: three accused men gambled for their futures and the pride of their families, friends and class by trying to bluff their way past the tenets of an outmoded and unfair law. The price of their loss was the additional weight of possible perjury to their original guilt upon conviction. Now the question is, was it worth it? If these three men were guilty from the beginning, what would have been their punishment had they admitted their true behavior at the time of their arrest? How would the trial have been conducted if each had revealed honestly his guilt to the court? Who would have benefitted the most, homosexuality's friends or its enemies, progressive or reactionary society? It is asking much of men in their positions to admit to sexual irregularities before the world, but isn't it also asking too much for any man to brand himself a liar in order to save an already questionable respect and position in present day society?

Only last year Sir John Gielgud was brought before a British magistrate for soliciting the attentions of other men. His defense was simple, admitting guilt, pleading fatigue and intoxication. His sentence was a fine, a reprimand and an order to see a doctor.

The cases have their similarities and I, for one, believe Gielgud chose the wiser course. This terrible decision may face you or me before the day you read this article ends. Naturally, any of us should seek legal advice first, but then what do we do? To confess is to put ourselves at the mercy of our enemies. To fight may give us temporary freedom. But to deliberately lie may bring forth not only an additional wrath and contempt from our peers, but the disgust of our own consciences. There, I should think, is the gravest danger. For myself, when that time comes, and I believe it will, I think I will make a clean breast of the whole thing and take a chance on the understanding of my fellow citizens, for it is my belief that honesty will do more to win mass respect for our plight than anything else. One day recognition and equality shall be ours if the world does not revert to the moral follies of the hide-bound, church-ridden past. Will adding ethical insult to moral injury hasten, or delay, the process?

Peter Wildeblood's message to his mother in the recent Montague trial, before sentence was passed:

"The jury are out now. But whatever they decide I do not want you to be ashamed of anything I have done. Be glad, rather, that at last a little light has been cast on this dark territory in which, through no fault of their own, many thousands of other men are condemned to live in loneliness and fear!"