

The chain

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THE CHAIN

by Rolf

It had been snowing for hours.

Slowly, and as in relief from their endless falling, the great flakes formed a glittering cover for streets and squares. In their dancing veil the first street-lights lit up. The neon lights on the buildings splashed multicolored rain on the white snow. Fewer and fewer people were to be seen in the streets and the roaring traffic had lessened considerably. In the dim light it was hard to recognize faces even a couple of inches away.

«I'm sorry.»

When the two men collided and were on the point of walking on, something stopped them. Two faces, both deeply tanned by the winter sun, looked at each other.

«Toni!»

«Mario!»

If Toni had not been carrying so many parcels they would have embraced then and there—despite the dignity their slightly grey hair demanded. All Mario could do was take hold of the other's arm and shake him. «Good heavens, Toni! What a surprise. Are you living in town?»

«Yes. It's been three years now. But how do you happen to be here?»

«I just arrived from Bombay. Only five hours ago. I wanted a Christmas at home—without palm trees.»

«Mario . . . but do come along. We both look like snowmen. Let's have a drink. Do you have time?»

«Plenty of time.»

Within a few moments they had entered a bar. They lifted their glasses to each other, talked thirteen to the dozen, and grinned and laughed like youngsters. There was no end to the questions they had to ask each other, and there was plenty to tell. The friends had not met for a dozen of years.

When Mario had left for the tropics, Toni had already been married. Yet their parting had been hard and difficult. In the years that followed they had exchanged letters though these became fewer in number as time went by and both men had to spend their time and energy in building their lives and careers.

But how quickly this was all forgotten now! They felt each other's presence, looked into each other's eyes, and the twelve years suddenly seemed non-existent. Only now and then Toni's eyes held a strange expression, and he looked past his friend as though he were no longer in the chair near him.

«Anything the matter? Am I keeping you, Toni?»

«For goodness sake, no!» And Toni lifted his glass. «To old times.» They had both been active in sports, leading skiers for a good many years. Toni had been first in a European ski-tournament. His photograph had been in all the illustrated weeklies, and had in fact led to his meeting his future wife. It was she who had made him her captive, and not the other way round. It had not been easy for Mario to lose his best friend so suddenly. He and Toni had meant the world to each other. Toni's decision had been inexplicable to Mario at the time, though to everyone else it had seemed the most natural thing in the world. Maybe Toni's marriage had caused Mario to give up his own sport activities and to start a new career in the tropics. Well, all this was past history now—but it was certainly

wonderful to see Toni with his deeply tanned face, and to feel again the fascination which Toni's eyes still held for him. But why did he avert his gaze?

«How is your wife?»

«She is all right.» He sounded barely interested.

«And the two children?»

«Same.» Again he looked past Mario. But then he turned to his friend, slightly brusque in his movement. «Where are you staying?»

«At the 'Touring Club'.»

«Listen, Mario. Strange as it may sound I can't ask you for Christmas Eve. But on Christmas Day my wife leaves with the children in the morning for St. Moritz. They will be away until New Year's. I'll be calling for you at noon on Christmas Day. We'll have lunch together. Is that all right with you?»

«Certainly, Toni—I'd like nothing better.»

«Good, that's settled then. I'm afraid I'll have to go now. My car is parked around the corner. Can I give you a lift?»

«No, thank you, Toni. I'll be only too pleased to have another walk. Don't think me sentimental, but for twelve years I have been waiting for this snow, for the wind from the lake, the swans asleep there—I'm sure you'll understand.»

Toni gripped his hand hard. «You're still the same old boy. You don't drag a chain along . . .» Hurriedly he took his overcoat, collected the parcels, and disappeared through the swinging doors. In his hurry he forgot to pay for the drinks but when Mario took out his wallet, the barman refused his money. «The gentleman is a regular customer here—that'll be all right.» Mario put a tip down and slowly got into his overcoat. The handsome page was too late to assist him but this did not deprive him of a tip either. Soon it would be Christmas when people should be happy.

Outside the wind from the lake blew the snowflakes into his face. The bells from St. Peter were ringing the fifth hour. He had another hour before dinner. He had seen Toni again. After twelve years. That was something to be digested first. But what in heaven's name did Toni mean by a chain?

*

On Christmas Day they drove out to one of the hills overlooking the lake. The sun had come through finally, and the world beneath them had turned into a glittering fairy tale land, with the lake a dark mirror. The car was gliding slowly along the foot of the hills. Now and then the road went down, only to curve its way up again to the deeply shadowed forests. It was the world they both loved so much. They had grown up in it and done their first skiing there together. But soon the hills had become too low for them and they had gone into the mountains every weekend as soon as the weather forecast was favorable.

They did not talk much during their drive. They were satisfied to be with each other, as it had so often been. When they came to a point with a good view, they got out of the car. In the distance they could hear the bells ringing for afternoon service. The ringing of the bells heightened the feeling of peace around them. Toni put his arm on Mario's shoulder. «It's so good having you here,» he said hesitatingly. Mario turned to him. He realized that some dark force was working in the features so well known to him. Suddenly his childhood friend took him in an iron-like grip.

«What's the matter? Toni?»

«Let's go home.»

On the way back Toni cut the curves of the road distressingly, and he rushed through the villages at a speed which would have merited him several fines.

They finally arrived at the gates leading to Toni's town house. There was a plate on which Mario read: Anton Krauer-von Wyl, General Manager. So Toni had made it after all. From a simple engineer to general manager of the big factories owned by his father-in-law. The house in the grounds bore all the stamps of tradition; it was big, handsome and luxurious.

Some time later they were sitting in front of the open fireplace. The housekeeper had brought tea, liqueurs, cakes and cigarettes, and had then been dismissed for the rest of the day. That housekeeper was another manifestation of a style of living utterly foreign to Mario; he didn't like her at all. Mario felt relieved when her discreet, regarding, veiled look was no longer upon them. —

It was heavenly to stare into the fire, to enjoy the tea and to have a leisurely smoke. But Toni was still not speaking. Finally Mario broke the silence.

«Toni—I don't know whether I still have the right to put a question, but something is apparently worrying you. And if my friendship still means something to you, tell me what it is. No need to say that whatever you tell me will safely rest with me.»

But the silence continued between them, becoming heavier and heavier. Mario took Toni's hand in a firm and assuring grip. «Do tell me.»

With heavy irony Toni finally answered. «Can't you see for yourself? I have sold myself—that's all.»

Mario continued to hold his friend's hand but withheld his answer for a while. Finally he said, choosing his words carefully. «You are the much-envied general manager of . . .»

«Oh yes. I have come a long way. When you left Europe I started working like a horse. Well, I did enjoy the work and I still do. But that's all. There is nothing behind it.»

«But you have healthy children — —»

«Educated by my wife in such a way that their father takes only third or fourth place with them. She's in the driver's seat.»

«But—surely—you're her husband—»

«I was her husband until the second child—the boy—was born. His name is Mario.»

«Mario?»

«Yes, Mario. Your own name. My wife had no idea why I insisted on that name until—one day—she came across some letters from you—from those days when we — —»

Mario let his hand go. Out of his shocked surprise he said, barely audible, «You—you kept my letters?»

«Yes.» And barely audible also were Toni's words that followed. «I *had* to keep something of you, after you had left me.»

The clock was thinly striking five. Mario had got up and seated himself on the arm of Toni's chair. «Toni—I did not leave you. I simply made room. You had decided in favor of Irene. You did it surprisingly quickly and without telling me anything. But everybody—mind you, not I—everybody was thrilled when the leading European skimaster got engaged to the daughter of the leading business-man in our town. As a marriage present you were made manager of the branch-works at Baden. The excellent engineer had a chance we'd never dreamed

of. And when Irene was expecting her first child there was only one thing for me to do—to disappear. Quietly and without any fuss. I was forced to assume that I'd been an episode in your life which had come to its natural end. After all, your wife is very beautiful and — —»

«— — very rich.» It sounded like the cut of a whip. Toni stared rigidly into the leaping flames.

«I— —didn't say that.»

«But I am saying it. I've had it served to me morning, noon and night for years. I must say it once aloud—otherwise it'll choke me. I'm still the engineer who married into millions and who ought to be pleased that his letters weren't presented to his father-in-law.»

Mario got up, frightened.

«— —your letters with which she is blackmailing me. She stopped having marital relations with me when our boy was born, and called—Mario.»

There was an unbearable tension in the room. The sun had set long ago behind cloudy mountains. Mario lost himself in the growing shadows. Finally he approached Toni once more. «And you—do you suffer from your wife's saying no to you?»

Slowly Toni looked up. «No, Mario, no. It would be a lie if I said otherwise.» He kept his gaze on Mario when the friend with a slight gesture pushed back his hair in which there was already so much premature grey. Toni quickly took his hand and said clearly, «I took the wrong turn that time. One shouldn't sell oneself, not even for a first-class job and much less for public opinion.» And when Mario returned his steady gaze he put his arms lightly on the other's shoulders. Near Mario's lips and eyes he asked, «I want—you—Mario. I shouldn't have lied to myself back then. I did, however, and now I've got to pay back for it with my life. But not today and not tomorrow and not in these days which are our own now. Days for you and me only, Mario, for you and me. May the world think what it likes about our love. We know each other and we can give to each other all—as before.»

All of a sudden the light of the flames was upon them. Conventions and lies disappeared in their consummation.

*

The days that followed seemed like hours, hours which passed like minutes. They were together again—that was all that mattered. Toni left the work in the big factory to his underlings for once. Snow and skiing tempted the two friends and, above all, they wanted to recapture the bliss they had shared when they had both been young. They spent the evenings quietly at Toni's sitting comfortably before the open fireplace. The sour-looking housekeeper looked haughtily at the room, her master, and his guest before she finally departed in the evenings. When she had gone the two friends became the youngsters they had been once long ago, and lovers without any questions or doubts.

*

The morning of December 31st arrived. They were still in each other's arms when the cloudless sky behind the big windows began to lighten. Mario was still relaxedly asleep in his friend's arms. Toni did not dare to take his arm away. He was fully awake but he wanted to look at the face as long as he could, at every single feature, the shadows over the lids, and the beauty of the full-curved mouth. One more day, a whole day and a whole night he longed to live in this

world he had turned traitor to, and which he had sold. Again and again his eyes roamed over the beloved face next to him . . . Tomorrow Irene and the children would be back and all would be over.

Hadn't there been a slight noise in the room, a strange noise—the opening of a door — — —

All *was* over.

His wife was standing in the doorway.

*

As was only to be expected, the housekeeper had informed her mistress of the strange guest. Irene had returned to find out for herself. A separation now seemed inevitable. Toni was ready to take all the blame in the divorce proceedings. But that wasn't the way his wife wanted things to run. She wanted to triumph over him—for many years to come. To give him his freedom? Freedom for this decorative husband who was such a good counterfoil for her at the large parties she loved so much? A husband so well liked everywhere? Never, never, never. It was different with the children, of course, especially with the small boy. But she had also made up her mind in regard to this problem. Her husband would not have a finger in the children's upbringing. But otherwise? No divorce. Not yet. And, after all, the scandal might touch her own family . . . No, he would not get his divorce.

*

Once again the two friends were sitting in the bar where they had lifted their glasses to each other a week ago. There was quite a crowd this time in the bar, and they had to lower their voices. They both knew they would never see each other again—nor should they. Mario did not speak much; as a rule a quick talker, today a choking feeling in his throat prevented his talking. Only Toni spoke—with a forced calmness, as though everything had been settled for the best and finished forever.

«Listen, Mario, I shall not see you off at the station. There may be people on the platform I know—and I'm not sure of my behavior once the train will be moving out. But I am sure of *one* thing—I shall never forget these days as long as I live. Do not think you are under obligation to me, where you are going now, to another continent. I cannot be robbed of what you have been to me, even if someone else will make you happy one day—and for that I'm praying. But these days will remain for me a jewel that no one's eyes shall ever see. Wherever you are—there I shall be, with our very own happiness. Always and always—as long as this life will last. Let's drain our glasses and shake hands. Farewell—and—thanks for everything.» And in a subdued voice that Mario could hardly hear, he added, «Don't follow me out now when I'm leaving. We are under observation. I shall not look back at you either—I shall take the light of your eyes with me and shall know that their light will always be with me—even when— —» He got up and turned away. Mario heard his steps receding. When a little while later he stood before the entrance of the bar he could see the tall figure of his friend disappear slowly into the snow. He had not turned round again.

*

Three months later, on board his ship, Mario was reading the daily papers from home. His eyes fell on a paragraph: «The well-known general manager Anton Krauer-von Wyl, a pioneer in his work, president of numerous organisa-

tions, met with an accident while driving his car on a small lonely mountain road. His death was instantaneous.» On the next page Mario saw amongst the obituary notices the one from his family: «Deeply mourned by Irene Krauer-von Wyl and her children.» — —

There were no tears in Mario's eyes. All he thought of were his friend's last words: 'I shall take the light of your eyes with me and shall know . . .' Yes, Mario knew too, in the way one knows about the great, the deep and undemonstrable things: he had been with his friend in his last hour.

Toni had broken the chain.

And it was good so.

(Translation by Rudolf Burkhardt)

Christmas in Chicago: 1951

Nils W. Nilson

The snow had been driving in from the Mid-west since the beginning of December, blanketing the eastern cities, and the bitter cold fronts sweeping out of Canada cut like a knife. The last minute rush was thinning out, but it was still hard to get through the streets on Christmas Eve. Stairs and walks were no sooner swept than they were covered again. Cars were piled with three feet of snow, and still the huge flakes continued to swirl out of the sky and between the skyscrapers of the Loop making it look as though the heavens were touching the earth in one blinding mass of white. The snowplows had finally quit, for, if the cars were not already snowed-in somewhere then they were parked and left. A strange quiet settled over the city.

Bud had only been in Chicago several weeks, but, somehow, it was just like all the other cities that he had been in over the past three years—always this empty, unfulfilled longing driving him from one state to another, one city to another—hope, disappointment, coming, going, always the same, he thought. Still, here he was making his way through the deep snow to that little bar that, again and again, always drew him like some invisible hand. He had started out hesitantly. One who had called Europe his «future» for the first 20 years of his life and now found himself living in the New World couldn't help but consider staying in his room with a lot of memories of the Christmas trees of his happy childhood, and a smile passed over his face when he thought of the rolling ranges of the Schwarzwald that had been home for him. After all, he thought: who would leave the shelter of his four walls on a night like this?

He shook the snow from the collar turned up high around his neck and entered the small, dim room. A dull light reflected off the bottles in the shelves. The bright cut-outs spelling «Merry Xmas» had been paper-clipped to a thin silver cord strung-up in front of the bottles, and he noticed the deft way in which Frank would pluck a bottle from the shelf, pour the shot, and replace the bottle without breaking the cord. Frank glanced up and saw Bud standing there: «Oh hi, Bud! Vee-Gates?» «About the same, Frank!» he replied with a friendly smile.

He winked at Eric and decided to join him, for, with the exception of a small table in the back corner, only the bar was empty. A large, bare, ramified piece of driftwood hung over the fireplace, and a large, smouldering log occasionally flaring up threw a flickering light through the room. The moments of