

# Christmas in Chicago : 1951

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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

brightness would be followed by an interval of murky darkness, and Bud watched the shadows of the driftwood branches leap out like long arms trying to grasp the emptiness only to sink back a moment later into the fireplace.

The bar was a good place to sit, he thought. He could see the entrance from where he sat, and he could tell by the movement of the storm curtain when the outer door was opened. Who would it be, he wondered? Is it *him*? Is it *the* one that one is always following, half-awake half-dreaming? Actually, he thought, has *he* ever walked through any door *anywhere*? Do you really have to be this alone?

Quiet glances—sometimes shy, sometimes questioning—crossed back and forth over the horseshoe bar. Frank kept the usual beers and mixed drinks set up, and, now and then, someone pumped a dime or quarter into the juke—the hit parade and a lot of alcohol help one forget. He heard someone talking loudly. The folds of the storm curtain would be pushed aside, and he watched all eyes turn to the snow-covered figure of the newcomer. God! Always more and more, he thought, and no one finding the other—everyone so damn lonely. How hard it was to say just the few simple words one felt. Right now in Germany, Switzerland, France—all the countries that he knew—loving people . . . ja, ja! *liebende Menschen* . . . were giving each other gifts . . . and here he was trying to say just a few simple words . . . to *someone*.

Suddenly he realized that he was being stared at, and he looked up straight into two dark, shining eyes evenly set in an almost pale but beautifully chiseled face. Bud had been so lost in thought that he hadn't noticed when the youth entered. The shawl collar of a deep purple ski-sweater rolled back softly at the neck, and Bud could see a delicate chain from which hung a tiny silver cross. He realized that he was staring, but he felt too weak to tear his eyes away from the gaze of the young man, and he felt more than saw an almost imperceptible smile on the delicate curves of the full lips.

A furtive glance at the others and Bud realized that, though no one seemed to know the youth, he had already attracted quite an audience: all eyes were staring at the young man. The conversation had almost stopped, and the tension in the room was enough to crack the glasses. Bud quickly looked back into those eyes that had not moved, and, feeling the blood pounding in his head, he realized that he was starting to perspire. There he is . . . there he is, he thought. Say something . . . do something . . . smile . . . there he is just two yards away! Everyone felt rooted to the spot.

Perhaps it was 30 minutes, perhaps two hours later—time had stopped—but, just as quietly as he had entered, the young man eased himself from the stool, slipped into his coat, and it was not until the cool puff of air being fanned in by the storm curtain falling back into place had brushed his face that Bud realized that the youth had left and that it had not been a dream. No! . . . No! . . . oh, God, no! . . . he thought . . . he mustn't leave . . . he *can't* leave. Bud grabbed his coat from the hook and almost broke into a run in getting to the door.

One could hardly see more than 30 feet. The arc-lamps were gleaming white spots in a sea of swimming whiteness, and it was only a matter of seconds until fresh tracks were completely obscured.

Oh, no! . . . No tracks . . . Where did he go? Bud hesitated. Don't be a fool. Who runs through the streets on a night like this? . . . The sea is full of fish! . . . No . . . The subway . . . That's it! . . . He must have gone down there . . . Only 30 seconds away. Bud leaped down the stairs two at a time. The platform was

empty, but noticing a suburban train about to leave, he sprang into the nearest car just as the automatic doors slammed shut and the car lurched into motion. Stupid! . . . Stupid! . . . he thought. Not the vaguest idea where this train is going . . . Leaping on like a mad man . . . Just the pure chance that he's here . . . And what if he is? . . . Then what? . . . He must be! . . . He must be here!

He walked toward the rear of the train trying to look behind the newspapers without looking like a fool: nothing! He doubled back toward the front of the train. One more car to go and he would look like the biggest ass of the evening, he thought. He started slowly down the aisle looking both right and left . . . There he is! . . . there . . . on the last seat . . . on the left behind the newspaper!

Unconscious of the roar of the wheels beneath, Bud eased himself into a seat so that he had the headlines of the youth's paper directly in front of him. Easy . . . easy . . . don't make a sound . . . sit down quietly . . . God! They're dying and spending Christmas in foxholes in Korea, and I'm chasing him like it's all that matters! Occasionally the page would be turned, and Bud would see the brown wavy hair tapering into a widow's peak in the center of that smooth, un-lined forehead appear for an instant over the top of the paper. He noticed the clean fingernails, and it gave him a warm, good feeling to watch the index finger of those strong, sure hands come up slowly and insert itself smoothly behind the next page to be turned.

But, now what? . . . What do I say? . . . Maybe he's going home to the family . . . No . . . Christ! . . . He can't be more than 23 or 24 . . . If he was going home to the family he would have gone long ago, and he wouldn't be out this late . . . Think! . . . Think! . . . How do I introduce myself? . . . He smiled . . . I know he smiled. The train started to slow, and Bud heard the scraping hiss of the brakes against the wheels. The door in the rear of the car opened, and the nasal twang of the conductor rang over the noise of the train: «Evanston—Eeee-vanston.» The paper was quickly folded and Bud found himself staring into a strange face.

The fellow smiled, and, drawn by that friendly look, Bud found himself standing on the platform with the twingling red lights of the train rapidly fading down the tracks. The tears welled in his eyes and he was about to break into sobs when he heard the voice of the stranger at his side: «I'm sorry, but you look a little lost. Were you trying to go someplace particularly?» «Oh, no, I was just riding.» «That's tough luck,» the stranger said, «for that was the last train tonight.» Bud looked down at his shoes and tried to fight back the tears when the stranger continued in a warm, clear voice: «Look, my name is Fred . . .» « . . . And I'm Bud . . . » he heard himself saying. «Well, look, Bud, if you would like you could stay at our place. I live with my mother, but I am sure she would like to have you.» He must have seen the tears, Bud thought.

Bud was able to mutter a word of thanks, and the next thing he realized was that he and Fred had left the platform just as the station lights were switched out, went through the turnstile, and were now walking silently through the howling blizzard.

Fred opened the gate in front of a large house, and, as they passed several firs, Bud tried desperately to think of something to say. They entered the house, and it was not until he had followed Fred to the top of the stairs that Bud heard a door open on the first floor and the clear «Fred?» «Yes . . . it's us . . . Bud and me.» «Bud????»

Fred took Bud's coat and led the way back down the stairs and opened the door to the living room: «After you, Bud.»

Fred's mother, a book folded on her lap, was sitting beside the large, beautifully decorated tree that had been placed in front of the french doors, and Bud felt her scrutiny as he introduced and pardoned himself. Her face was kind, and, though it was lined with the years of heartbreak and sadness, it was a joy to him to see the deep understanding that existed between mother and son. He saw the personal magnetism and the love of humanity that age gives instead of takes, and he felt his heart going out to her.

«Well, I am very happy that you are here, young man . . . Fred is very choosy in his friends, he is always, always alone: if he has found you, then he must have found something special, and you are very welcome here.»

The evening went quietly between the three of them, and, more and more, Bud realized that he had, at last, after years of wandering with a heart filled with loneliness, found a home in which he could speak as he felt, in which he didn't need to lie anymore, and in which he could throw his arms around those he loved: around Fred, around Fred's mother—something for which he had hungered for so long—and a thought of gratitude came into his mind for the beautiful stranger in the bar. The stranger that was gone like a light but who led Bud to find the pure flame of his happiness.

Translation: H. H.

## BOOK REVIEW

THE EYE AND THE HEART, by Carlo Coccioli (Wm. Heinemann Ltd. 1960)

This is the long-awaited translation of «Fabrizio Lupo» a homosexual novel by a writer who has pondered for many years on the perplexities created by people plagued with a sense of not belonging. They struggle to attain the affection of a 'beloved' but there is a smell of defeat in the air, as society, the Church and, *au fond*, themselves, conspire to wreck their dreams and aspirations of acceptance.

The story can be likened to a sandwich with a factual beginning and ending, but filled with an indigestible pate, in the form of a novel, written by Fabrizio, an Italian artist, describing the phantasmagoric journey of The Child.

When Fabrizio meets French sculptor, Laurent Rigault, in the first passages, he gives up trying to sublimate his homosexual urges and capitulates to his charm, feeling he need seek no further. The backgrounds of Paris and Florence are filled with compassionate sidelights into the twilight world inhabited by men loving each other cynically, wagering sardonically on how long their little *affaires* will last. The suicide of the young American, Gordon, seeking his long-lost brother in youths who resemble him, is one of these pathetic vignettes. One longs to find that Lupo-Rigault will refute their destinies, but the agonizing debates, the love-hate and will to self-destruction becloud the entire narrative. The symbolism in the middle passage, which comprises one half of the book, has moments of great beauty and the landscape of The Child's journey is lit by passages of vivid imagery and insight; but it has an ambiguous quality which only momentarily illuminates the quest of The Child/Fabrizio for the perfect partner.

When one reaches the unhappy ending, there is a feeling that here is a creation which was imperfectly cast, although the matrix had the materials of a major inquiry into the theme of homosexual relationships.

Diego DeAngelis