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Autor: Cords, André
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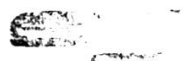
Percy, négligeant l'appui de Lady Evansdale, ouvre les bras à Kehlmarck qui n'ose pas, ébloui de bonheur, affolé par un vertige de tendresse, courir pour s'y précipiter. Mais comme William s'avance en trébuchant et, presumant trop de ses forces, chancelle sur le point de défaillir, Henri n'a que le temps de se ruer vers lui pour le soutenir, le presser contre sa poitrine, et il aspire à ses lèvres comme la consécration de la vie que son sauveur lui avait inhalée après l'avoir retiré de l'eau....

Au dehors, un souffle attiédi par le premier soleil d'avril écoule, aux joues blanches et rigides de la neige, des larmes d'espérance, des larmes de gratitude envers le printemps qui s'avance victorieux pour reprendre possession de Bodenberg-Schloss.

(fin)

Fireworks

by André Cords



Reimann looked down from the terrace of the hotel at the throng of bantering people in holiday spirits wandering slowly up and down the Beach Promenade at Scheveningen. The coolness of evening rolled in from the sea and the light faded into the dimness of twilight; the sound of music wafted from the casino. Farther out, on the almost-black sand, stood wooden scaffolds, from which hung intricate crowns, pin-wheels, suns and garlands composed of countless rockets and other cleverly arranged powder-capsules. Buses and street-cars continued to bring new groups of the curious from The Hague near-by. Families with many children took possession of patches of ground, yelling rascals thrashed through the crowds, groups of giggling girls made themselves conspicuous and gabbled over the boys' silly jokes. Rare were those alone and lonely — some lost and withdrawn into themselves, the others restless, wandering about until they should somehow perhaps come upon a clue, an objective.

Reimann saw all this and looked scornfully above and beyond it with a bored gaze. He had no desire to mix with the crowd; it would only make him feel solitary, ridiculous, perhaps disgusted.

Across the way someone had looked up — twice — and gone on. Reimann's roving glance caught sight of a slim figure passing by, a yellow-gray coat, blond hair which peeped out from under a slanting cap and disappeared at the nape of the slender neck. He braced his slender hands on the stone railing and leaned out. The stranger had stopped. Reimann's indifference was instantly gone; he was torn by an inner agitation, a sharp tension. Over there stood the blond youth looking up. Should he go down to him? But what would he say to him? No, it was impossible. The first gong had rung and soon he must go to dinner.

But if he did go to the boy? He would say, «How handsome you are! Certainly, you don't know me, but may I not tell you, nevertheless, that you are handsome? Did you not look up at me — long, time and again — as if we did know each other? Don't we know each other really? Was that perhaps coincidence? Curiosity? . . . No, that was utterly impossible, it was crazy. How could he have said that to the young man? A shiver seized him at the thought of making himself ridiculous. No, it couldn't be

While the busy waiters quietly moved about, bringing the meal, pouring bubbling wine into delicate glasses, while the half-whispered conversations in several languages swelled to a quiet hum about him and accompanied like a ritual prayer the clatter of costly china, Reimann imagined himself walking in the street. He was running after the stranger, whispering a word to him hastily, almost believing that he sensed the breathing of the boy. He forgot his surroundings; only the image was alive, more real than anything around him. He saw the fine, slender face, the light brownish skin-color which the Javanese blood gave to the Dutch . . . Reimann ate mechanically and not at all impatiently. He was too much carried away from the present. He revelled in fantasy; then he caught himself, saw that it was late and hurried away.

When Reimann reached the sea later it was already dark. It was impossible to get through the crowds of people. The odor of the many bodies, each smelling of a different milieu, disgusted him. But a force more powerful than disgust and reserve drove him on. Many times he started at the sight of a yellow coat and was disappointed when it proved not to be «his». Suddenly the lights and street-lamps were extinguished; vague outlines took form in the dim night. A moment of paralyzed expectancy, then everyone crowded to the railing. The mass of people became impenetrable. Already three sizzling rockets shot into the air, curved back downward and burned out. Others followed with loud reports. Finally the heavens sparkled in every direction. The suspended garlands began to glow and a rain of glittering sparks fell onto the ground. Suns whirled their fiery faces and sang with a soft whistling sound. The crowns emitted roaring flashes that lighted up often as bright as day. A thousand frightened, fascinated faces stared white and ghost-like into the night sky. Above them floated countless tiny clouds of whitish smoke which fused together like a turbulent sea.

Reimann moved along slowly behind the wall of humanity. Few people stood in the background. No one saw him. There — Reimann started — there was «his» coat! He moved quietly near to the beautiful boy. Fire whirled though the sky from all directions, colorful brightness alternated with breathless darkness. Over on the pier faces emerged and disappeared, crowded together like grape clusters. Reimann felt himself tremble with infatuation and inner tension. The youth had noticed him, there was no doubt of that. Indeed he pretended to gaze upward with the others, but in reality he was very much aware that the other was near, very very near, shifting from one foot to the other and each time edging a tiny bit nearer. — «How lovely he is!» Reimann thought. Now, especially in the half-darkness, he seemed to him even more desirable. Their bodies touched gently, cautiously and almost as if by

accident. Fire coursed through Reimann — giddy, satiating fire. It seemed to him as if the two of them were there alone and unrecognized, he and the beautiful one; all around them countless faces ecstatically raised, unaware. They pressed ever tighter against one another, the two strangers, already so close in spirit. Did not each understand the other's desperation and longing, everything unspoken which lent to their eyes a secret lustre full of questioning and enticement and surrounded them with delicate significance? Yes, they knew each other better than these others. And they were more intimately united, without the sharing of commonplaces, one entirely within the other, surrendering in spiritual embrace.

The youth had not yet looked toward Reimann, only pressed close in the consciousness of leaning upon him, both carried away by unspeakable desire as the last flames dispersed into the mass of clouds, explosions roar and the crowd, released from its spell, slowly and reluctantly dispersed. Reimann walked beside the youth; he took this liberty and the other granted it silently. Not until they had left other people far behind did Reimann begin to speak. French?... German?... English?... The youth looked at him and smiled. No, he understood none of these. He said something in his own language which Reimann, in turn, did not understand. Thereafter they avoided speaking; the effort was useless. Silently they moved down from the road and onto the flat beach. The sand gritted softly under foot. Far out there it was damp and desolate. They went all the way to where the dark waves broke, incessant and inevitable. The night was all around them, veiled by low, moving clouds. The beam of a lighthouse glided silently through the darkness. Now the two strangers were movingly affected, here surrounded by the power of solitary forces from which a solemn savagery streamed into them, sensation as it was in the beginning, strong and simple and compelling. The youth, his fine head tossed back, eyelids closed and mouth half-opened, received the kisses which united and bound the other to him in the depths of his soul. Completely surrendered, he lay in the arms of the stronger one, who drew him so close that they could no longer breathe. Their bodies found each other, clung together, permeated one another passionately, seeking in this one instant to make up for everything which the gossip of other people denied them. Oh, now Death might have awaited them, public disgrace, transgression in the eyes of the slanderers and exceedingly righteous, something even worse than persecution and lack of understanding, if there is such a thing — all this could not have torn them out of the reckless desire which held them at this moment, two lonely beings in the midst of the sublime power of the mute presence which mingled and flowed about them without judging them, surrounded by solitude which sheltered, protected, defended and absorbed the transfigured lovers!

It was late when they wandered back onto the deserted road. Illuminated windows and streets brought them nearer to reality. But they were not affected. Without a word they parted, each so elated and filled with the gratification of the other that neither grief nor despair could awaken in them. They accepted all, just as it had to be.

(Translated and reprinted from an earlier edition of «Freundschaft».)