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Thirty Years Between

1930.

Joseph Akerman, Kirchstr. 18. That was Joe's name and address, and my photographic memory never forgot it.

«Care to dance with me?» he asked. He stood in front of me and gave me the first of the many nice and slightly lopsided grins that were to follow.

«Yes rather,» I said and got up.

We went to the large dance floor. It was a couple of years before Hitler came into power and swept, amongst many other things, these monthly all-male dances into oblivion and sent most of their participants into his concentration camps.

But as yet we had no inclination of what was to follow, and tried to enjoy our life as much as it was possible under the shadows of a law that forbade us our pleasures.

That first dance with Joe set the pattern for what was to follow. We were both sufficiently masculine to want to lead when dancing. It took us only a couple of seconds to find that out and adjust ourselves into a position in which neither led the other. Joe was one of those rare people who wanted not only his own pleasure but the pleasure of his partner as well. Maybe that's the reason I never forgot him.

After our first dance we went out into the big garden surrounding the dance hall. At that time I was still «suffering» from the after-effects of my first «grande affaire» and did not yet want another. But I was only twenty-two, after all, to Joe's twenty-five. It was a lovely summer night. We necked a little, and then we went home together.

We stuck together for a whole year. We became very fond of each other, which in the end, may count more than a great love. We met each other fairly frequently. I can still vividly see him enter my slightly sloping room in that lovely old part of the town — all of which was later destroyed in one big air-raid.

When I changed my job and went to live in another town nearby, Joe kept on visiting me regularly. Not seeing each other too often certainly played a part in our relationship staying so beautifully alive.

Another year went by and when I finally went to work in the south of the country it was hard to leave Joe behind. We exchanged letters for a couple of years but slowly, imperceptibly, our friendship came to an end. My life went into other channels as no doubt his own did. But memory of him remained sweet and unblemished.

1960.

Hitler had arrived and departed, so had the Second World War. I had lost all there was to lose, including my savings and my house. Disgusted with the goings-on in post-war Western Germany I left the country. Another ten years passed until I returned one day to the town where I'd known Joe.

Joseph Akerman, Kirchstr. 18. The selective process makes you forget a good many things in your life, but I'd never forgotten Joe's name and address. The town where I'd known him, however, was no longer there. All its mediaeval charm had been destroyed during the war. It had become an ultramodern americanised city. I had never visited Joe at home so I looked up Kirchstr. in a town-directory. It was in one of the suburbs. I went out and found No 18. No war-damage had been done here. I barely believed my eyes when I found the name

plate of «Akerman» on the ground-floor. Hesitatingly I rang the bell. A woman, about my own age, opened the door.

«Excuse me, but I'd like to inquire into the whereabouts of a certain Mr. Joseph Akerman,» I said, «I used to know him quite well some thirty years ago.»

«That must have been my brother-in-law,» the woman answered.

«Must have been . . .?»

«Yes, he was reported missing in Russia in 1945. We never heard from him again.» When the woman saw my consternation she asked me to come in. She offered me a chair and started talking, mostly about herself and her own family. Finally I asked her whether there wasn't a photograph of Joe left. She went into the next room and came back with a large cigar box crammed with family photographs. She rummaged through them and held out two small snapshots.

«That's my brother-in-law.»

It gave me a slight shock. These were snaps I'd taken of Joe myself some thirty years ago, on a happy, sunny afternoon in my sloping room. I'd lost my own prints with everything else when my house was destroyed during the war. Strange to see the very same snapshots emerge from an old cigar box now.

«Would you be so kind,» I asked the woman, «as to let me have these small snaps? You see, I took these myself ages ago.»

«Of course, you can have them. Gladly. We have others of him.» And I saw the others — Joe, grown older, and, later on, in uniform. For him, as for me, time had not stood still.

I thanked the woman for the pictures and took my leave. At the streetcar stop I sat for a long time on a bench. I looked at the snapshots, and happy memories flitted through my brain. But when I realized that Joe was the first one of my lovers of whose death I had learned, I felt all of a sudden incredibly old.

R.B.

Book Review

MASK OF FLESH by Maxence van der Mersch. London: William Kimber 1960

The doubts and self-questioning of this novel read like the confessions of a dope addict who cannot shake the monkey on his back.

It is almost a diary, vividly describing the shame and remorse of a man who cannot reconcile himself to his homosexuality. He looks back with horror on his awakening to the fact that he cannot be accepted into a world which does not understand his compulsion. He remembers his loving grandmother, his domineering mother and ineffectual father, his quest for love and affection from casual strangers who are seeking only physical release.

A priest, to whom he confesses, spurns him with the words «You are a monster! You are damned!» When he seeks advice from a doctor on whether he should marry, he is given illustrations of such unions which end in chaos and misery. He is not content with advice from his friends-in-experience: «Stink as little as possible. Go on putrefying discreetly.»

His efforts to stifle his «abnormal» desires lead him to aid the Abbe Tiennot. Here he comes to know people who love truly and deeply, despite wretched circumstances. Yet this ends in his forcing himself upon a 17-year old who is disgusted, and his self-recrimination leads him to virtual immolation in an effort to subdue his mask of flesh.

Compassion for human beings in this plight suffuses the entire book. Is it significant that «Mask of Flesh» was written about the time of the author's «Bodies and Souls» but not published until after his death?

D. deAngelis