

# The circle : a short story

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# THE CIRCLE

A short story

Once again the circle of a year was on the point of closing in, Ralph was thinking, as he went slowly down the steps leading to the platform on the main station at Hamburg. There was still time until the fast train from Lübeck arrived. But the unrest of expectancy had driven him out of the hotel room he occupied — the same room in which he and Robert would now live for three days to come. For the last years it had always been a week at least which the friends had been able to spend together at Hamburg—a short enough time compared to the separation of a whole year. But this year there would be only three days. And even they had to be looked upon as a special gift from the gods.

Up to the last moment it had looked as though the friends would not meet this year at all. Once again Ralph shivered when he thought about all this. This shiver had been his constant companion since the day when it had come to his knowledge, two months ago, that Robert's wife, Christine, had stolen and read one of his own letters to Robert. By this theft the structure of a life, carefully erected and cared for, had collapsed completely. Even if the worst—a divorce—had been prevented, it had looked for a long time as though Christine had set for her price—with the backing of that stolen letter behind her—the end of the friendship between Ralph and Robert. That Christine now knew about his being different, Ralph was thinking again, was the smallest trouble of all. And fortunately the letter had spoken only of his own being different and had not touched upon his relationship with Robert.

But finally Robert had managed to remain victorious. From the facts as told by the letter, of course, nothing could be deduced, and other things in her husband's life had become clear to Christine. Robert had even readily admitted them but all Christine had finally gained had been a kind of Pyrrhic victory. Robert had agreed to all the conditions she had made, if their marriage was to go on; only when she asked him to cut out Ralph completely from his life had she met with an iron opposition. Perhaps she had also realized after the first shock had worn off, that Ralph's part in their lives had been different from what she thought when reading the stolen letter. Whatever it was that had helped, Robert had been able to save his friendship with Ralph. And if Christine had given him only three days of freedom this year—this was a small sacrifice compared to the fact that they were able to meet at all, if only for so brief a time—preceded by hundreds of days spent alone and to be followed by hundreds of others spent equally apart.

That was now his fourth cigarette, Ralph reproached himself. But it had always been the same way—his tense waiting on platforms which he tried to overcome by chain-smoking. It had always been that way, too—the pressure of the heartbeats at the moment the train with the friend arrived.

Fifteen years of their love had left them very much the same. What had started at that time had remained the center of both their lives, and had survived the pre-war time, war itself, and its aftermath. It had known its heights and depths, it had been shaken several times in its foundations, had successfully met danger from outside and inside, and had now finally survived, a couple of months ago, the shock of Christine's discovery. In an uncertain, lonely world Robert had become for Ralph the one security of his life. Was it strange, then, that his heart was beating so hard, so fast?

«Platform Four, Platform Four. The fast train from Lübeck will arrive presently. Please be careful.» The voice from the loudspeaker cut into Ralph's thoughts. He went to the end of the platform. It was an old custom of theirs that the one who arrived would be in the last carriage of the train. Well, there was Robert, looking out of the carriage-window, and the intensity of his smile killed all the unrest Ralph had suffered for the last few hours.

«Bob—finally.»

«Ralph—thank God.»

A couple of seconds later they shook hands. Robert's muscular figure looked not older, even if the dark blue eyes now lay deeper in their sockets and his features were drawn more sharply.

«Did Christine make any more difficulties?»

«No. Things went better than I had anticipated.»

«And how is everything?»

«No need to worry.»

«How are the children?»

«Fine. And how is your mother?»

Quick first exchanges while they walked both towards another platform for their local train to Blankenese. Fleeting dozens of subjects were mentioned, but in everything they said there was the knowledge of their having three days to themselves. Three days and three nights—out of which the strength had to come for the next twelve months. Had those fifteen years been really anything but partings? Ralph suddenly wondered. And now, for the last few years, there was even the Baltic Sea between them, and Stockholm was a long way from Lübeck. But he pushed the thought away. That their friendship had survived was all that mattered and should be allowed to matter.

Blankenese. The friends got off their train and walked along the road near the river towards the small hotel situated high above the water. A warm September sun turned the afternoon once more into summer. They were both well known at the small hotel. When the landlady saw them come in, she invited them for a cup of tea. Another hour had gone before the door of their own room shut behind them, and they embraced each other.

Some time later they had pushed a small table into the bay-window. Deep below them was the Elbe river full of white sailing boats. Their talk lost all its jerkiness and turned into quieter channels.

«Christine read only that one letter of mine, not the second one?»

«She read only the first one. When your second one arrived I was already back from my short business trip.»

«But how did it happen at all that she went into the factory and your office? She rarely if ever goes there.»

«She must have had an idea for some time that part of my correspondence was coming to the office. Usually the porter keeps those letters for me when I am away, but something went wrong this time and Christine found your letter on my desk.»

«When did she tell you about it?»

«The evening of my return. When she had put the children to bed she came in and just put your letter in front of me. Thank heavens I was prepared. Ever since I returned, I had a feeling there was something wrong with her.»

«And then—»

«It seemed to be best to own up to your being different, I couldn't well do otherwise—with your letter there. I let her talk on and on until she had talked it all out of her system. That gave me time to collect my wits. And I realized at once the way I had to take. The only sensible thing to do was to tell her of my bisexuality. I even went further and told her of two former friends in my life. That gave me a chance to describe our own friendship in a different light. It wasn't too difficult, because, after all, nothing in your letter had given anything away.»

«And what happened then?»

«Up to this point Christine had believed to carry the victory herself. She started already telling me of the conditions under which she might be willing not to go in for a divorce. That was the point I had been waiting for. Because she had suddenly to realize that the whole proceedings upon which she had looked as the real fight had after all only been a skirmish.»

«How's that?»

«Well, it was then I started to talk to her about our marriage. And I did not mince words either. How loveless our life together had been—how Christine, by her selfishness and her inhospitality, had driven all my friends from my own house, that even you would have given me up long ago if you had not thought that Christine and I would in the end find happiness. Slowly she realized how her position was weakening. It was easy from there on to salvage our friendship.»

Ralph relaxed and leaned back in his easy chair. This was all right again, thank heavens. As was usual with him, when Robert faced danger, he had acted quickly and intelligently, and he had met this crisis most successfully. Maybe just his stubbornness not to give up Ralph was the only proof needed to make Ralph sure of Robert's feelings for him and to bury all future doubts. Gratefully he put his hands across Bob's—their union had withstood the hardest test.

Their talk went on. They held no secrets from each other. Ralph's life held none, and Robert's 'adventures' usually came out in the course of a long talk, to be laughed at, and commented on ironically by both. Ralph knew his friend well enough to know that he was unable to stay away from any temptation offered him—tall, broad-shouldered and handsome as he was, Ralph knew from long experience about this character weakness of Robert's, and always enjoyed being told of last year's adventures when they met. They did not count with him, as in another way Robert's marriage did not count for him. What happened between him and his friend happened on a different level—neither touching Robert's marriage nor his adventures. Even the fact that the physical relationship with Robert was still the only one of his own life in which he was able to give himself completely did not seem as important as the fact that mentally he owned his friend as no one else did.

«And how are the others?» Ralph asked.

The 'others' were Bert, the actor, and Andreas, the painter. With both of them Robert had been close.

«Bert is going into another engagement this coming season. I may have told you this in one of my last letters.»

«And Andreas?»

«That's finished. You know how it is with me. A couple of times together and that's the limit with me. I'm sorry, though, in Andreas' case. Pity you never met him.»

«But why is it finished?»

«I like him as much as ever—bar the physical side. I know how fond he is of me and I realize fully well what a valuable person he is. Everyone knows that, even those who know him only slightly. Hein felt it at once.»

Hein—that was a new name.

«Hein?»

«A young worker I met at Andreas' last year.»

The answer was given quick enough—but had there not been a hesitation in the air for the bare fraction of a second? Had not Robert lowered his eyes equally quickly? Or was it only his own sensitivity which had once again let him make a mountain out of a molehill?

«How did Hein happen to meet Andreas?»

«They met while swimming. Andreas asked him to pose for him. When I saw Hein for the first time at Andreas' I could well understand Andreas asking him to model for him. He was standing in the nude on the platform, and I'll own up I hadn't seen such a magnificent body in years.»

«How old is he?»

«Twenty four.»

«And then you became friends?»

«I met him once more at Andreas' studio, and we walked back to town together.»

Questions and answers had followed each other quickly. They seemed not greatly unlike many similar ones of former occasions, Ralph wanted to believe. But there was something different this time, something intangible, something hard to define which seemed to make this exchange of questions and answers ambiguous. That love makes blind, Ralph was thinking, had never been true in his own case; to react to the slightest nuance in Robert's voice, to see clearly every expression in his eyes, not to be deceived by anything—that was what those fifteen years had taught him. When he looked up he met Robert's gaze upon him. There was a uncertainty—yes, and what else was in Robert's expression? Was there a feeling of guilt, was he afraid to hurt Ralph or afraid of a confession? Whatever it was, there remained only one question to be put without thinking of the consequences of asking it.

«You love him?»

«Yes.»

The room was quiet.

From outside one could hear the noises of children playing; a door was banged somewhere in the house, a telephone was ringing, quick steps walked across the corridor. But it was all swallowed up in the intense quiet of the room.

When Ralph became conscious of his surroundings again, Robert was standing behind his chair and had put his hand on his shoulder. In dropping down into this chasm Ralph had not realized that the friend had come near him. Maybe it was better that way. It was better not to look at each other for a while. Robert's hands closed tightly round his shoulders when a shiver ran through Ralph's body. There was only one thought in Ralph's mind. There were no accusations, no laments, no reproaches—there was only a boundless fury for himself on account of his own blindness. Had he not some minutes ago felt sure in the knowledge of owning Robert as no one else owned him? How could he have missed this—which was there now facing him—which was the most obvious thing of all? He had counted everything but the only thing he had forgotten was the simple

fact that as he became older, Robert would search for the younger companion—and being Robert—find him as well.

«Do talk, please,» he heard Robert say behind his chair.

«Didn't I talk?»

«No. And I can't bear your silence any more.»

«I'm sorry.»

Ralph leaned his head back and looked into Robert's face above him.

«Sit down. I'll behave. It was a bit unexpected—that's all.»

«But how did you realize it at once?»

«I don't know. I can't explain.»

«But you always understood everything—»

«Yes. But this is different, isn't it?»

«Yes.»

«How did it happen?»

«I don't know myself, really,» Robert said hesitatingly. «It had even nothing to do with the fact that I had seen him in the nude at Andreas' studio and knew how handsomely built he was. No,» Robert's speech became more and more groping, «something must have happened on that evening we walked back to town together. But even then I felt nothing but the delight of being in the company of this clean-cut young man. We did no even mention the other things—easy as it would have been.»

The more Ralph realized how difficult it was for Robert to tell him of this, the more he knew—maybe better than Ralph himself—how deep all this had gone with his friend. But it was no use stopping now. Only when all had been said could it become clear how far their own relationship had been affected.

«Of what did you talk then?»

«I knew already on this first evening how lucky I was to meet Hein. He is really an extraordinary chap. Can you imagine—when he was out of work for a couple of months in the spring he utterly refused to let me help him financially? And it would have been so easy for me, you know. The only thing he kept asking me for were books. He couldn't read enough. I couldn't ask him to the house, naturally, on account of Christine, and we did not meet as often as I would have liked. And there was something else. I had to be most careful.»

The second time he gave himself away. Robert had never been able to be careful, as he put it now, when in the middle of some new adventure.

«And when did the other thing start between you?»

«Oh—much later. Months had passed.»

«How did it come about?» Ralph asked, possessed by the idea of learning everything.

«It happened on a Saturday afternoon at the Timmendorf beach. We had been late, too late for swimming anyway. However, we found a secluded spot on the beach and undressed for a late sun bath. Hein was strangely quiet that day. Even when we were lying side by side he did not talk much. When I once turned round I saw him sitting half-up. He seemed to be self-conscious and so I asked him whether there was anything the matter with him.»

«And?»

«He didn't say a word at first but then—to my utter surprise—he bent over me. All of a sudden his face was near my own. Then he said—and I could feel how difficult he found it to say these words—'You may think me an idiot, Robert, but I've got to tell you once that I'm in love with you'.»



«And that's how it began?»

«Yes, that's how it began.»

Now the circle had closed in. But it was a different circle from the one Ralph had been thinking about when he went down the steps to the station platform that very same morning.

«But all this has nothing to do with you and me,» Robert said after a long silence.

Has it or hasn't it, Ralph was asking himself. Superfluous question. He had lost the game. He was being paid with a vengeance. But what vengeance? And as though Robert had been following the trend of this thought, he suddenly said something which did not seem to have any connection at all with what they had been talking about.

«You have no idea how I suffered through your friendship with the two men you found during the war.»

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But even more unexpectedly than by the words themselves Ralph was surprised by the tone of Robert's voice. «You—suffered—?» was all he was able to say.

«Yes. I would never have told you if I would not have had to tell you all this today.» With these words the scales between them were very nearly even again. And yet . . .

«Robert, what happened to me during the war in France—wasn't that something like a parallel to the love affair you were in when we first got acquainted and which you kept going for years after we had met?»

«Yes, you're right. But after France came that youngster you met in your Siberian POW camp and with whom you returned.»

Ralph felt as though thunder had struck him. «But you knew all the time that my relationship with that boy never fulfilled itself. And it was you, after all, who made me see things as they were and led me back to you.»

«That's not what matters,» Robert was saying. «fulfillment or nor fulfillment—both times you loved.» Ralph kept silent. «You know that I am talking honestly,» Robert went on, «I learned to get over your love affair in France because I believed in our love for each other. What was difficult then was ten times more difficult when you returned with that youngster from Russia. And yet, I knew all the time through what kind of hell you were passing. This knowledge has been with me from the day I met Hein. To lead him the way you led that youngster was all I desired. You have to excuse only one thing—that I found with Hein what you did not find with that young boy you met in Siberia.» He stopped. His searching gaze lay upon Ralph.

«Even though Hein and I have become lovers, I know fully well that the main thing in such a relationship is to do one's best in forming our younger lovers' characters. They are young and we are older—it's up to us to take the responsibility for them. But do not forget one other thing, Ralph— —»

Ralph looked questioningly at his friend.

«This other thing,» Robert went on, «is far more important than you may be able to realize just now—being hit by what I had to tell you. It is nothing more or less than our own love for each other. That's what I'm talking about. If this love of ours did not exist I wouldn't have told a word of all this. But now and since you have heard about it all, it must be seen whether we believe in the constancy of a love as we have believed in it for fifteen years. Can what

is inside us and has become part of us be destroyed? Doesn't the faith we have in each other belong to a higher plane?»

He stood up. Slowly Ralph got up also. Their outstretched hands met. There was no need for any more words. Robert's arm was firmly on Ralph's shoulder when the two friends went to the bay-window. There they stood and looked down on the river which flowed on without end, and carried away in its current all that had stood threateningly over their love.

Richard Arlen

## Man's Chase after Happiness

Man's chase after happiness is a feverish and unceasing thing. As we grow older, we search more frantically for it than formerly—and it can be found no longer. «If I were just as happy now as I was then,» we say, and sigh. But the truth is that few men have more to their account than a dozen hours of happiness—a fragment here and there out of the dull and sullen roll of life. It is those fragments, however, which are remembered and pursued so fruitlessly forever after. We seek them again. Paradoxically enough, how much happier man would be were he only to realize that a state of unhappiness or frustration or despair is the *usual* thing, the lot of nearly all men nearly all of the time! The frenetic reachings would cease, the compulsions disappear, the nervous chase smooth itself into a serene and contented acceptance.

(From an unpublished novel)

by John McAndrews

*If a man does not keep pace with his companions,  
perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.  
Let him step to the music which he hears,  
however measured or far away.*

(THOREAU/WALDEN)