

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 34 (1966)
Heft: 12

Artikel: Merry Christmas and a happy New Year
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-570354>

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Merry Christmas and a happy New Year

by RALPH FORBES

«At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.»

(Milton, Lycidas)

For me, summers are a very special time, golden months when all my senses seem to emerge, as it were, out of hibernation, to live again. I experience a wondrous rejuvenation; I want to go places, do things, to smile, and breathe deeply. In point of fact, every winter I grow a bit older, but every summer I am young again. And always, it seems, the summer's lovely promise is fulfilled for me.

Except for last summer. Last summer something went wrong. It was worse, in fact, than any winter I have ever experienced. It was worse because I had come to expect so much. But somehow last summer died before it was full-blown. The months wore on, one behind the other, each growing duller than the last until finally it reached a lethargic, pointless state; it was merely hot. For some odd reason I made no new friends last summer, and nearly all of my old friends took extended holidays. I was left alone, with no place in particular to go, and nothing to do. I spent my evenings at home in my apartment either reading or listening to music. I was bored and restless—but most of all I was lonely.

With so much time, then, and so much loneliness, I fell upon an idea that at first seemed a bit mad. But then the more I thought about it the more tempting it became. For years I had subscribed to «The Circle» which carried one of those 'ad' columns designed to assist people in meeting one another. I might also add that I had for years been acquainted with the magazine's editors. Why then not give it a try myself? Who knew, perhaps it might prove just the talisman I needed.

I toyed with this idea, irresolute and undecided as I often am, for weeks until, when I finally made up my mind to do it, the summer had gone. But just as it had been difficult making up my mind to do it, so it was equally difficult in deciding not to. And so, having missed the deadline for the November issue, I found myself reading my own ad in the December issue.

Much to my delight replies came immediately. Perhaps the boys in The Circle office were thinking, «Let's get all ad-letters off right away; they might bring happiness to someone for Christmas.» But how extraordinary it was that Peter's letter should have been the very first of them all, only three days after the ad appeared.

Peter's letter was so exactly what I had been looking for that I could not resist reading it over many times in amazement. Now all that remained was to meet him. And yet another coincidence, although the magazine is internationally circulated Peter turned out to live in a small town not at all far from my own. It was all entirely too good to be true. So I lost no time in answering him. In turn, I received an immediate reply which included his telephone number. He was asking that I give

him a ring if at all possible before Christmas. Needless to say, that is precisely what I did.

«It's awfully nice of you to ring me so soon,» he said after I had given him my name. We then fell to chatting freely.

«Any plans for Christmas?» he asked after a short while.

«Well, I like to spend Christmas Evening on my own, really. It's the one evening in the year when I rather prefer to be by myself. To look back—and repent of my sins,» I added laughingly.

«Then what about Christmas Day, or Boxing Day?»

«Actually, I've made no plans as yet.»

«Then wouldn't you like to come and visit me on Christmas Day? I'd enjoy meeting you very much.»

And so it was arranged that I take a noon train and visit with my mysterious new friend, and on Christmas Day, of all the days of the year! It was rather like that strangely shaped package you find under the tree, when you hadn't at all been expecting it.

So there I was, jostling off for a journey by train to meet a perfect stranger. As we raced along my thoughts tumbled one upon the other. Who is he? What sort of man will evolve from two letters and one phone conversation? All I knew was that he was in his thirties and my junior in age. That alone was thought enough for a good ten miles.

Before the windows of my carriage an endless width of glimmering snowy landscape moved away in the distance. The air was clear and the sky so blue that the far mountains showed their crystalline peaks in splendid detail. And in the foreground the forest through which we were passing was full of fir trees covered with hoar-frost. I settled back in a spell of pleasant anticipation.

When at last we pulled into the station I impatiently secured a taxi and was whisked off to the proper address. I rang the bell and immediately heard sounds on the other side. Seconds later I was exchanging smiles with Peter.

My first impressions? He was marvelous—tall and quite beautifully built with a pair of magnificent shoulders and an intelligent face into which life had drawn faint lines. I was thankful for that, because a very young, perfect face can be beautiful and yet at the same time entirely vapid. Peter's was an exciting, finely chiselled face.

I entered the very tastefully furnished apartment and at once whisky glasses were brought out. We took seats across the room from one another and for a short while spoke of my trip. Soon, however, that subject was exhausted and there came a silence.

«Well,» I said, leaning back and taking in a waft of smoke from my cigarette, «now we have met each other. It must be quite a disappointment to you; I am far from what one would call a young man.»

He smiled at me oddly and waited a moment before speaking. «That is not in the least important to me. You should know yourself how deadly boring a young person can be, and often is. Sex, to me, is only a small portion of companionship. I demand a good deal more. Oh granted, sex is important, damned important. But there is so much more, and I have found that only an older person can really give it. No, I think I can safely say that I am not disappointed.»

I was so agreeably surprised by what he had said that I took far too large a sip of whisky and promptly choked on it. Amused, Peter tapped me on the back until I had gotten control of myself.

«You were worried about the difference in our age, weren't you?»

«Yes, I'm afraid I was. Far more than you can imagine.»

«Then please forget about it. If anything, I should worry—about being too young for you, not your being too old for me. It is you who has the advantage.»

Oh you can't imagine what these words meant to me. Christmas had indeed come, and that deathly boring and lonely summer had been more than worth it.

We talked a good deal during the course of the afternoon and there steadily grew inside me the feeling that I belonged with him, that we had known each other for a long time. We were comfortable and relaxed. We laughed together, compared notes on each other's life, and seemed to get to know each other in an amazingly short time. Then quite unexpectedly Peter stretched himself languidly and looked at me for a long moment.

«So how is it with you? Are you satisfied with our first meeting?»

«Satisfied?» I asked, struck by the inadequacy of the word. «Oh yes, infinitely more than satisfied.»

For a time no words were spoken. We merely looked at one another happily. Then in silent agreement we put out our cigarettes. The time for talk was over.

Just as he had been exciting and finely developed intellectually, so was his body. His great naked form languished across the bed, delicately hirsute and unimaginably sensuous. Within minutes I was transported from the norm into a near-euphoric state. What could I have possibly done to deserve this magnificent creature?

When at length we rose and dressed he seemed content. «Won't you stay the night? There's no reason to go, is there?»

«Yes—yes, I think there is. And I believe you can understand it. I suppose I'm of the Old School. This is, after all, only our first meeting. Can you understand my feelings?»

He smiled faintly and warmly at me. «More than that,» he said in a gentle, low voice, «I admire you for it.»

Some time later we sat down to a cold supper in his living room. How wonderful it was to be waited upon for once, to admire the attractively arranged table, and to have someone sitting opposite you with whom you could share the same feelings the wonderful afternoon had borne within you.

Late that night he went with me to the station where I was to take the last train. We said a simple but meaningful good-bye out front instead of his coming with me onto the platform. It was, after all, a rather small town.

I cannot say with honesty that I recall my journey back home. I was in a haze, a glow of happiness and excitement, with the one word 'permanent' dominating all my thoughts.

II

During the week that separated the old and the new year we rang each other up several times. Each talk over the phone added its weight to the growth of our understanding.

«Peter,» I said one evening as we talked long-distance, «The Circle is having its New Year's Eve party again this year. How'd you like to come along? Frankly, I don't much care for such things, but just this once I'd love to go with you. All my friends will be there and I guess I'd just like to show you off a bit.»

«Oh would you really?» he said, much pleased. «Very well, in that case I'd love to. Besides, what better way to begin the new year than with you?»

Thus it was that early in the afternoon of New Year's Eve Peter entered for the first time my own world. We were to leave for the party from my place. It is impossible to express the elation I felt when I met him at the door. The dear fellow, he had brought me a bunch of flowers, as if he had been a teen-ager calling for this first date. He came in and we chatted over tea before leaving. And can you imagine, I was nervous. At my age, and I was nervous. But it was just that everything was so lovely. The flowers, his presence, the party, oh everything. Who'd have ever thought that happiness would make one nervous?

Much as I shy away from large parties, The Circle's party was enormous fun. And what an awful lot of teasing I got, teasing that thoroughly delighted me. I knew quite a few people there and yet I was the last person they'd have expected to arrive. But what startled them the most was that I should have come with a date. That too was highly irregular for me. And of course it would be just my luck to straight off come face-to-face with Rolf, the 'Circle's editor. I made the introductions and suffered with a smile on my face the friendly twinkle in Rolf's eyes and his fatherly benevolent greetings. We talked for a couple of minutes and when he learnt that Peter had been a direct result of 'La Petite Feuille' he laughed in his friendly and yet always slightly absent-minded way and proposed to introduce us to his best co-worker, the one who did all the work on the ads. «He'll be pleased when he learns that despite all his eternal misgivings about ads the two of you seem to have found happiness by way of one.»

When Peter and I had taken a seat alone, I whispered to him.

«Make over me, Peter, just this once. Make them jealous. Make them all turn pea-green with envy that of all people *I* should be with the most attractive man in the crowd.»

A puckish smile grew about his mouth despite himself, and then he kissed me. Other than the very stroke of midnight itself it was probably the highspot of the evening.

But it was only the first kiss of the evening. From that moment on, Peter was extremely affectionate, and when we had ordered champagne, and midnight came, he kissed me again, very hard and lovingly.

It was nearing four o'clock when we left. Now Peter would be sleeping for the first time at my place

The loveliest moment of all came when I awoke late New Year's Day and realised that I was not alone in my room. I looked down beside me upon a broad, muscular chest. He still slept peacefully. I got up quietly, pulled on my robe, then drew a chair beside the bed where I could fix my eyes upon him and bask in my new treasure. What unimaginable happiness could a year starting so wonderfully bring me?

Soon, however, I had to arouse him and give him breakfast, since it was already past noon and he would be taking an afternoon train. He opened his eyes cautiously, then smiled up at me.

«I slept well. It was a lovely night.»

«And it is a lovely day, too. Come, I've breakfast waiting for you.»

We sat down together, I in my robe and he just in his trousers, with his beautiful chest visible before me all through the meal. After we had eaten and had reached the cigarette stage he suddenly said,

«I have just made up my mind.»

«Oh? About what, may I ask?»

«About Rome. I've never been there. And now that I have at last found someone who also appreciates it I intend to go. How would you like to come with me for a week's holiday in Rome this Easter?»

«It would be perfect. I'd like nothing better than showing you Rome.»

«And then in late summer I'll return the present. We'll take our holidays together and it'll be my turn to show you Dalmatia.»

«Please! Please, you're overwhelming me.»

«Then you will go? On your word of honour?»

«On my word of honour.»

«Then you must not forget it. A word of honour is a word of honour.»

«Don't you worry about that,» I insisted. «What could possibly be more wonderful than seeing Rome and Dalmatia with you?»

But even the longest breakfast must needs come to an end. It was late and we had to hurry and dress. Shortly thereafter, I went with him to the station and very reluctantly watched him board the train, then pull off into the distance. When it had gotten completely out of sight I turned and began to search for a taxi. It had been difficult seeing him off, and yet I knew it was only for so short a time compared to all the lovely hours we would be spending together. Now the loneliness of last summer had been forgotten; I was happy and elated. Before I knew it I had walked the full distance home.

III

We knew one another quite well by now and so I realised that January and February were the two busiest months in the year for him.

«But at least once a week, if not twice, I shall be in town with customers and that'll give us always a chance to see each other. Even a shared lunch is better than nothing. I can't bear the thought of a week going by without being able to see you at least.» This had been a New Year's promise, given on the night of that unforgettable party.

I am Capricorn by birth and this year my birthday fell directly in the centre of the week. Peter rang me up to wish me many happy re-

turns. Oddly enough, his own birthday followed soon afterwards, he being Aquarius. On its eve, he rang me up again.

«So sorry to call you at this terribly late hour, but believe it or not, I've only just now returned from work. I'm wondering if you might be free tomorrow, and if you wouldn't like to come up for a visit?»

«Oh yes, of course I would, but . . .»

«But what?»

«Well . . . what an awful lot of birthdays we're having . . ., I mean I realise that tomorrow is your birthday, and I might just be in the way. After all, there's your family . . .»

«That's true; I shall have to see them sometime during the day. But I can arrange matters so as to see them at night. The important thing is that you should come, no matter what.»

«I'd very much like to, only I don't want to put you to any inconvenience.»

«No inconvenience at all. You know how terribly pleased I'd be to see you. There is a train at 10 AM and another at noon.»

«Then I'll take the one at noon,» I found myself answering, for I could not resist his invitation. «That should still give you enough time with your family later on in the evening.»

«Tell you what. I'll talk with them tomorrow morning and give you another ring. Around ten. That'll give you plenty of time for the noon train. Though actually there's no need for another call.»

«No, no, I think it best that you check first and then let me know.»

«Fine. No need to tell you how very much I'm looking forward to your coming. And on my birthday, too. That will be my finest present.»

So there I was, excited once again. Sunday morning came and found me up at an unnaturally early hour. I stretched and said to myself, 'Happy birthday, Peter. Consider yourself kissed.' The next thing I did was to wrap the small present I had gotten for him. Then around nine o'clock I sat down to a light breakfast with Scarlatti's St. Cecilia Mass in the background. In that way the hour from nine to ten passed agreeably enough. Then I began to get nervous again. So in order to speed the time along, and perhaps quell my nerves simultaneously, I took a shower. After the shower I dressed leisurely, donning for the first time my new light gray suit, which I had purposely saved for this occasion. With his sharp and critical eyes he'd be bound to spot it straight away. The choosing of the right tie proved somewhat of a problem, but at last I was satisfied. In the meanwhile it had turned eleven o'clock and I was ready for departure. All that was missing was his phone call telling me to go to the station.

But the phone did not ring. It turned noon, then one o'clock and still no call. I felt slightly tired, so I decided to lie down for a brief nap. I didn't worry since the phone was by my bed and would be sure to awaken me.

I suppose I fell asleep very quickly. When I awoke it was almost four PM and still the phone had not rung. I got up and dressed, (but this time not in my new suit) then went out for a much needed walk. At any rate, it had grown far too late for a train.

After my return two hours later I had my cold supper, then thought that it was time to ring him up and wish him a happy birthday even if I hadn't gotten to be with him. I could not have forgiven myself had I let the day slip by without doing it.

«Hallo?» Once again I heard the resonant voice that had come to mean so much to me.

«I wanted to wish you many happy returns, Peter.»

«Ah, how very sweet of you. Wouldn't you know it, there has been the very devil loose around here today. One visitor after the other. Even now there are people here.»

«Then I won't keep you. I just wanted to give you all my very best wishes.»

We talked on for a couple of minutes more and yet there was no mention of my having been invited to come up that morning. Instead, he thanked me once more for my calling and remembering. «Next week things should lighten up a bit at the office. I'll give you a call either Tuesday or Wednesday to fix a date. It's high time we saw one another again, wouldn't you say.»

«Well . . . yes, I think so too.»

When he had rung off I fixed my bed and moments later was lying down. On the shelf beside me was a large box of candy that had been given me for my birthday, but which I had steadfastly refused to touch, thinking how much nicer it would be to share it with Peter. Hurting inside, but half refusing to admit it even to myself, I broke open the candy and picked up a 'whodunit' I had begun the day before. Eventually, I drifted off to sleep, but it was a fitful, restive night.

The following week came, and I went impatiently through my daily office chores, then quickly home in hopes of a ring of the phone, but it did not come. Occasionally it would ring and I would reach quickly for it, nervous and jittery inside, but it was always some local friend calling merely to chat.

The slow, painful days wore on, one after the other, until two weeks had gone by without a word from him. Dropping deeper into depression, I tried to console myself with the frequent reminder that this was after all his busy season at work. He was simply too pressured. I had no right to expect anything, to accuse him of neglect. But I'm afraid I did not altogether convince myself. I couldn't even bring myself to call him up as I have never liked forcing my attentions on others.

Finally an entire month had elapsed and still no call, no letter, no word whatever. I slept poorly and neglected my work at the office, now completely preoccupied with what might have happened. The hurt grew deeper and deeper, and at the same time I seemed to be slowly getting used to it. More accurately, it had now become merely a dull, sustained ache filling my waking hours.

Then I'm afraid my usual stoic nature went to pieces. What had happened; what had gone wrong? Was it something I had done? Things had seemed so *right!* It wasn't fair; it was not fair!

But it wasn't until some time after that that the shattering blow came. I was spending the evening at home when Tom a valued friend

of mine dropped by on his way from the movies. We took tea together and discussed the film he had just seen.

«By the way,» he said, «how about that ad you ran back in December? Did anything turn up?»

«Oh yes,» I said, trying hard to smile. «There were a great many replies. It was all I could do to answer each one of them.»

«It sounds rather like fun, still. Especially for me. It would have been a perfect opportunity for me to practice my pet hobby.»

«Pet hobby? Which one is that? You have so many.»

«Oh you know, handwriting analysis.»

Why hadn't I thought of it before? Although I didn't completely believe in graphology it would be interesting to know what my friend could see in Peter's letter. Plotting quickly, I made a suggestion.

«I still have the letters, you know. Why don't you take a look at a few of them.»

«Love to. Bring them out.»

I crossed to my desk and grabbed up a small handful, taking care to include Peter's. I handed them to Tom, then settled back as he began to study them.

«This first one,» he began, «from a Bill Preston isn't bad. I can see immediately that he's on the quiet side, very conservative, almost dull, you might say, but of a very faithful and affectionate type. Also more than averagely intelligent, in an academic sort of way.»

«Do you really believe in it?» I asked.

«Pretty much, yes. Sometimes it can surprisingly accurate.»

The next letter Tom looked at, wasn't a very important one. But the one after that was the first letter Peter had written to me. Tom took it up. He looked closely at the hand-written sheet and then gave a low whistle.

«Well what's the matter?» I asked, hoping my tension wouldn't show.

«I hope you didn't take up with that one,» Tom said after a minute's silence.

«As a matter of fact I didn't,» I lied bravely, «though to tell you the truth the photograph enclosed in that letter tempted me a good deal.»

«What's in a photograph?» Tom replied, «it's his handwriting that matters.»

«And what does it tell you?»

«He is definitely not the sort of fellow I'd like you to fall for. An introvert who has a strong, a very strong tendency to hurt other people. He may have been hurt long ago by someone very deeply and now he's out for revenge, hurting others as he'd been hurt himself once. Stay away from him by all means.» Tom looked strangely at me, as though he sensed my tension.

«Well,» I tried to speak casually, «as I've told you before I never took up with him. Seems a good thing I didn't.»

«Definitely,» Tom replied briefly.

While he took up another letter I went to the window and stared into the night. Perhaps I would take off a few days a Easter and go to Rome —alone.