

"Younger than springtime..."

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle**

Band (Jahr): **28 (1960)**

Heft 10

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-570796>

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„Younger than Springtime . . .“

by Richard Arlen.

The prelude was an unexpected phone call from Antonio the night before. He isn't an Italian, as you'd think by the name, nor does he look like one but for the coalblack hair. And his name isn't actually Antonio either. But whenever I'm thinking of him, and that's quite often, I think of him as Antonio.

The first time I ever heard of him — a long time ago — was when I saw a photograph some one had taken of him. He was wearing only a pair of white trunks and was casually holding a fishnet. A couple of months before I saw this photograph I had read an excellent short story about a young Italian fisherman named Antonio. Somehow the picture and the story fused in my mind and started me thinking of him by that name. Some day I shall have to confess this to him, for 'Antonio' is frequently on the tip of my tongue when he is with me.

I saw this photograph three years ago, and begged an enlargement of it for my walls. It kept Antonio's face alive for me. All I knew about him was that he was in his early twenties, a mechanic by trade, and the proud father of a baby daughter. But all this had nothing to do for me with 'Antonio'. I never even heard his real name during those years and if I did, I forgot it promptly.

So the years passed, and then the delayed fuse took hold, and the firecracker exploded. On my birthday, too!

A very close friend of mine from the States had been visiting with me. He is one of the very few people I do call friend, and mean it. Since we both dislike sharing a bedroom with someone else, he'd stayed nights at a hotel, having the run of my apartment during the day. His return flight to the States was scheduled for my birthday, so we had had some celebration the night before. All that remained now was to meet him at his hotel and see him off at the airport; the end of a highly enjoyed visit by a contemporary with whom I nearly always saw eye to eye, and whose intelligent and lively presence had greatly enlivened my otherwise often drab existence.

Waiting for the streetcar to take me to my friend's hotel, I looked around idly and whom should I see on this birthday-morning but Antonio! Understandably my heart jumped! I got into the streetcar after him, and — luck favoring me — found a seat next to him.

There I sat, while that thrice damned shyness of mine flooded me like a river running wild. I wouldn't have found any opening at all but for the smile of fate upon me. At a stop we saw a huge crowd assembled on a square, and although I knew perfectly well what was going on, this offered me the chance to open a conversation.

«Do you know,» I asked Antonio, «what's happening there?»

«Oh yes,» he answered, «there is some outdoor shooting in front of that very old house for a movie.»

Those were the first words we ever exchanged. My shyness ebbed away from me as I realized how easy he was to talk to. Ten minutes later or so we got out of the streetcar at the same stop. I had expected him just to nod and go his way, but instead he lingered and we went on talking for nearly a quarter of an hour about all sorts of things. My pleasure was only marred by the tight time margin, since I had to meet my American friend. Very reluctantly I took leave of

Antonio — becoming shy again and quite afraid of trying to make some sort of date with him.

Lord, the way my American friend laughed when I told him all this! Seen with his eyes, I could not but feel that the fluttering of my heart had tempted me to make a mountain out of a molehill.

Fate must have been inclined to be good to me, but even so it took nearly another year before bestowing its second favor upon me. One day I was visiting my photographer friend, and Antonio suddenly put in an appearance. He wanted some photographs taken of his small daughter. Well, we were introduced, and over a glass of wine I told Antonio that this was in fact our second meeting. Slowly he started remembering our first meeting also.

Our talk à trois was interrupted by the arrival of a customer for a sitting. So I left with Antonio.

In the street I could not resist sounding him out a little.

«I wonder what you thought about me when we stood there at the streetcar stop, gabbing.»

He looked at me. A smile appeared on his face. It was so disarming and friendly that in advance it took all sting out of what he said. «Well — I thought you were just one of those queers.»

«Why did you bother with me at all then?»

The smile deepened considerably. «As a matter of fact, I thought you were quite a nice queer.»

«Thanks for the compliment,» I said wryly. «I'll do my best to deserve it.»

You can bet I made a date with him that time!

After this encounter he started visiting me, rather infrequently at the beginning, but more regularly as time went on. He used to call on me usually every other Saturday afternoon, while his wife went to visit her parents.

These afternoons with Antonio turned into something I started looking forward to very much. We got on extremely well with each other. I took a sincere interest in his work and all his small problems, and fussed over him, and who doesn't like being fussed over?

After a couple of visits he began to take a shower in my bathroom. I nearly swooned when I watched him undress for the first time. I think he rather enjoyed teasing me a little, showing himself so tantalizingly in all his uncovered beauty.

After his bath he usually rested on my divan. He never seemed to mind my touching his lovely, smooth, ivory skin. He was like velvet and satin from his head to his toes, except for his hands which were roughened by his work. They were a pleasant contrast to the silk of his body.

We had even come to the point of kiss-



ing and embracing each other lightly, far more lightly than I desired, when I realized one day that we were getting into a rut. I knew him very well by this time. I knew what a clean-cut, dependable youngster he was. I also knew that sex was highly enjoyable to him. He had shown me several photographs of his very good-looking wife, and from all I gathered his married life was entirely happy and satisfactory. But though a husband and a father he was still a very young man, and from hints dropped here and there I knew he was not against having a 'fling' now and then. Having married very early, he probably had not had the time to sow all his wild oats. Healthy and virile as he was, these extra-marital flings did not bother his conscience very much. He talked about them in such a way that one could not raise any serious objections. I knew all this, and yet had not in all this time made a serious pass at him myself.

One Saturday while waiting for him I saw the situation for the first time fully. It rather struck me. I had been reading, and found a French saying to the effect that expectation can be the ruin of lovemaking. Maybe this decided me. I knew there was hardly a moral issue involved. On the one side there were Antonio's self-confessed 'flings', on the other side this American friend of mine had pointed out to me in a letter the simple fact that Antonio was old enough to say 'yes' or 'no' on his own volition if I asked him a question. So, after nearly four years, I made up my mind finally to have a fling myself. I felt I had deserved it and knew also that even failure would not wreck our friendship. As it was, it was far more important that we were genuinely fond of each other — which we were — than that I was — granted, a bit foolishly and yet understandably — in love with him. That friendship of ours would almost certainly prevent a break between us even if my 'pass' failed.

The pass I had decided on was nearly wrecked before I even set it in motion. The near-wreckage, however, came from a totally unexpected quarter.

Antonio arrived. I had set the coffee table over which we used to exchange our news. It was a lovely afternoon but the air was very close. A thunderstorm was threatening. Antonio took off his coat and tie the moment he came in, and a couple of minutes later — with a brief 'If you don't mind' — he took off his shirt. Why should I mind? It was very pleasant to have him sit opposite with his torso bared, and watch the little movements of the muscles of his handsome chest.

On his previous visit he had asked me to write for him an application for a new job with a big concern. Since he hated writing anything at all, he had been uncommonly grateful for this small service I'd done for him. But maybe it's just sometimes such small helping gestures which show the younger partner that the older one is taking an honest interest in him. To his great pleasure he had received an answer to his application. Since it was a big concern, a very large questionnaire had been attached to this answer. Antonio had filled it in at home and asked me now to check the spelling and the answers.

That was the moment when the blow fell that nearly wrecked everything. In checking his parents' names and dates, I saw to my unspeakable dismay that Antonio's father was three years younger than I! It cost me a good deal to conceal my shock effectively. But I managed. My thoughts were running wildly around in circles. Of course I had always known about the gap in age between Antonio and myself. But seeing it thus in black and white, it became a tangible fact. Here was the simple explanation why Antonio and I had become honest friends but not lovers.

But every man has two sides to his character. That shyness of mine when feeling genuine attachment is one part of it. But if need arises I can also be as stubborn as any mule alive. And this time my stubbornness prevailed despite the shock that had just hit me.

Antonio had taken his bath, and the power and the glory of his body was stretched out on my divan. His was the sort of body I admired — his manual work had developed all his muscles equally well. There were no places too large, nor too small anywhere on his naked body. One of the gods of my many dreams, I was thinking fleetingly when I told Antonio, «Move over and make room for me.»

There was a faint surprise in his eyes when he moved his long legs.

For the first time I stretched out next to him. Not for long, though. I took my courage in both hands, lifted myself up slightly and bent over him.

«Whether you like it or not — I'm going to kiss you now, hard and long.»

And I did. I was past caring.

When finally our lips parted we looked at each other for a long time, before I asked him, «Did you mind?»

His answer was a very simple one. While a tender smile tugged at his lips, he drew my head down again and returned my kiss the same way.

That's how it happened the first time. It had been well worth waiting for, even if it had taken years.

While we had been discovering each other, the threatening thunderstorm had broken, briefly and violently, bringing in its wake a heavy downpour. Now wonderful fresh air was coming in through the window while we dozed lazily for some time before finally getting up. When we were dressed I told him I'd go to town with him on the back seat of his motorbike.

I had been on his bike several times before. It had always made me feel silly, happy and — I'm afraid — also ten years younger. This time I felt even more silly, and much more happy all the same when I remembered how slender and lovely to the touch these hips were on which I had placed my hands firmly.

In town he stopped near the station.

«Do you mind going with me to an afternoon dancing place?»

«Not at all. But what about your wife?»

«Oh, she won't mind my returning home a bit later.»

«I didn't mean your return —»

«What she doesn't know won't hurt her.»

«Well, *some* husbands. . .» I said.

«Come on, don't be a spoilsport.»

Ten minutes later he had spotted a good-looking girl in the place.

«Would you mind if I had a dance with her?»

«Why should I mind?»

«I mean — you won't be jealous?»

When I didn't answer him he went on, «I wouldn't for the world want to hurt your feelings. I like you far too much for that.»

«And isn't that all that matters?» I replied. «You go and have your dance, and I'll have fits of jealousy all over the place.»

He grinned broadly. We understood each other very well. Before he went off to the dance floor he said, «Don't pay the waiter; this is my party.»

He did not take to the dance floor once but three times, and always with the same girl. He was an excellent dancer from all I saw, and he enjoyed it.

While he was dancing the third time I paid the waiter. When Antonio returned he smiled mischievously.

«Made a date?»

Sometimes a grin serves as well for an answer.

«Well, *some* husbands . . .» I repeated.

The damned thing was you couldn't be annoyed with him. I looked musingly at him and quoted in a low voice, «It's a little deception here, a little deception there, that makes the world go round.» He looked surprised, but his answer came quick enough: «Some variety makes living so much more pleasant. And as long as no harm is done — well, *you* should know that best,» he finished, looking straight at me, but friendly enough. He was right — who was I to judge? There was a brief silence between us. Then Antonio put his strong hand for a second on mine — the peace treaty had been concluded.

Not until we were saying goodbye to each other before he took off on his bike did he remember the paying of our bill in the place.

«Oh,» I said airily, «It was a pleasure to pay for your pleasure after I had my own pleasure.»

I said this with a dead-pan face and there was alarm in his own when he looked at me. But not for long. A moment later we were both smiling at each other.

«Fond of me, you bastard?» I asked.

«You bet I am.»

His work-roughened hands gripped my own and I am sure he'd have kissed me then and there, had we not been on the street.

«See you in two weeks' time —»

«Sure — and make them go snappy.»

He quickly jumped on his bike and off he went. He turned once and waved his hand before he disappeared around the bend of the street.

It's nearly an hour's walk from the station to my place. But I walked it all. It was a lovely day in late spring. The lilac bushes were hung with their heavy grapes; you could not count all the colors of the tulips; there were forget-me-nots and daisies and velvety pansies; and above them all towered the huge chestnut trees in their full and fragrant bloom. Heavens, it was wonderful to be alive — and in love.

The Grand Tour

by James Gilmore

Notes of an American jazz tune simmered up the blazing steps of the Sacré Cœur from the Place below, blending incongruously with an almost palpable blue languor that seemed to envelop him.

A steaming panorama of Paris spread below — a nearly commonplace vista of rusty grey buildings, trees and hot sky. There were even neon lights — why did it seem strange to see neon lights in Paris, he wondered. It was another jarring, unexpected sight in a series of disenchanting experiences he'd had these last few days. Now he felt stifled, not only by the smothering July heat, but by a feeling that somewhere he had lost his way, had missed his opportunity really to make something of this trip.