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Inconnu . . .

by Frank Whitfield

When our love-making was ended, Ebi slept, his strong young body pressed close to mine, his arms round me, his face buried in my shoulder. It seemed strange that one who had recently been so masterful should now seem so young and defenceless.

I felt no need for sleep, and just lay there relaxed and content. I remembered how we had met, the casual glance, the awareness, the smile of invitation and acceptance. We had strolled quietly along the boulevard, talking quite easily as if we were old friends. Indeed, there had not been a moment of difficulty or constraint. We had a drink and a meal together, then Ebi had suggested, quite casually, this hotel.

«I cannot take you to my room; it is not nice, you would not like it there. And my brother may be in, we share this room, you see. If it is not convenient at your hotel, there is a place near here, very clean and nice.»

And so he had brought me here, and in the quiet, anonymous room we had loved, and now rested. I was very happy, my heart was full of tenderness and affection for this boy who an hour ago had been a stranger.

Then I remembered how agitated Lance had been at the encounter. Lance was a friend of mine who had been with me at the Flore when I met Ebi.

«You can't go with him, really you can't. I beg you not to. I fear for your safety.» That old-fashioned expression was typical of his conversation.

Poor Lance, so unadventurous himself, so envious of his bolder friends, yet so afraid for them. Suddenly I could see his solemn, rather owl-like face, could hear again his little clucks of dismay and disapproval, and he struck me as so droll that I began to laugh, quietly to myself at first, then aloud.

At once Ebi was awake.

«Why do you laugh? What have I done?»

«Not you, Ebi. Just something I remembered.»

He sat up then, looking suspicious but still rather sleepy.

«What do you remember? If you don't tell me I shall know you laughed at me.»

«I thought of the friend I was with at the Flore. He disapproved.»

«He did not like me?»

«I think probably he did. Or rather, he would *like* to like you, if he dared.»

«I do not understand. It is because I am Algerian?»

I ran my fingers through his thick, wiry hair, then kissed his eyes and his firm mouth before I replied.

«My friend, Lance, is very shy. He is too nervous for adventure himself, and he fears for his friends' safety when they find it. He is very nice, but rather an . . . an old woman.»

«He feared for your safety? Does he not trust Algerians?» His eyes had grown very dark.

«He imagines the worst about everybody.»

«And Algerians specially?»

«Don't take this so seriously, Ebi. And we are talking of him, not of me. I think he believes that Algerians are very—well, fierce, perhaps unreliable, violent.»

«And you?»

«If I felt that, would I be here? Quite truthfully, I have never met an Algerian before.»

He snuggled down again, holding me closely to him.

«I am not violent. I would never harm you.»

«I know that. I knew it at once.»

«There are bad Algerians, of course. But there are bad Frenchmen and Americans. There are good and bad everywhere.»

«Of course there are. And I've found a good one. And I'm very, very happy.»

«Why do you like me?»

«Why? That's a difficult one. Why *does* one like some people and not others?»

«But why do you like *me*?»

I thought for a moment. «Perhaps, because you are so manly.»

«You are a man too. You are strong. You are not... how is it? ... effeminate. So why do you like being here, being loved by me?»

Again I had to pause and consider.

«I believe, Ebi, that in each of us there are cells both masculine and feminine. In you the masculine cells predominate, and so I am attracted to you because in me it is the other way. Does that make sense to you?»

He thought about that, looking so serious that I had to laugh. «What does it matter? We are happy together.»

Much later I groped for my watch.

«Must you go?»

«I mustn't be too late. I have a conference tomorrow, very important. If it goes well there will be a lot of work for me.»

«But you will meet me?»

«Not tomorrow. It is not possible.»

«But in the evening...»

«I must dine with an American. It is very necessary that we get on well together.»

«So tomorrow you sleep with him?» He looked so jealous that I had to hug him.

«I shall not sleep with him. Nor shall I sleep with his wife, though I believe most people do. No, I shall just try to be agreeable and pleasant. I hope it may lead to business.»

«But you will meet me again?»

«Of course. The next evening? At the Flore? Eight o'clock?»

My watch told me that it was nearly midnight. Early for Paris, but I felt I must go. As I walked through the cool night, looking for a taxi, I thought with affection of Ebi, remembering our time together. And knowing that I should soon meet him again, I felt very content.

*

Although I was a little early for our meeting, Ebi was already there. He sprang up and ran to me as I approached, holding my hands warmly in his.

«I am so happy that you have come.»

«Did you think that I wouldn't?»

«I was afraid you might not. No, I didn't really think that, but Paris is large, there are so many people. You might have met someone else.»

«Oh, I did; several people.»

«Where did you meet these people?»

«In the Metro, in a bar in the rue Colisée, outside the Opéra.»

«You have been with them?» I could sense his suspicion and resentment, though he spoke carefully to hide his feelings.

«No, Ebi, no.» I could have laughed at the relief that showed on his face.

«I didn't even meet them, I just saw them.»

«They were very nice? Nicer than I am?»

«One was a young Spaniard. Very beautiful, very pale and sad. We looked, we looked again, but we did not speak.»

«The others?»

«A young soldier. He was the one in the Metro. We did speak. He asked me for a cigarette. He was on leave, and lonely. I liked him very much, but when he left the train, though he waited for me, I did not follow.»

«There was another. Who was he?»

«He was so like you, Ebi, that my foolish heart gave quite a lurch when I saw him. But it was not you, Ebi, and I passed by.»

He slipped his hand inside my arm, pulling me towards him.

«It was because you were meeting me? That was why you did not go with them? Oh, I am so happy.» His face was quite radiant as he smiled at me. «This evening will be wonderful.»

And wonderful it was.

Much later we lay quietly together, sometimes talking, sometimes silent, content to be together.

«I finished my work earlier than I expected,» I told him. «I nearly came to find you at that address you gave me.»

At once I detected a slight tension. «But I decided you might not be in.»

«No, I was not in. Please, I don't want you to come to see me there.»

«Why not?»

«I told you, it is not a nice room. It is not a good part of Paris, but it is cheap and I am poor. Besides, there are difficulties. My brother might be there, he would not understand. Please promise me not to go there to find me.»

«All right, Ebi, I promise. Unless you don't meet me as arranged. Only then I shall go there to find out why.»

«How long will you stay in Paris?»

«Rather difficult to say. Several more days.»

«Then back to England?»

«Yes, to London. But I'll be back in the autumn, I promise you that. We'll have a splendid time.»

«Shall we meet again before you leave? Tomorrow?»

«Tomorrow.»

Tomorrow, and another and another, stretching out in splendour before me. We slept a little, played, loved. Time passed.

Presently we took a shower, laughing, splashing each other. We were very happy.

«I'm hungry,» I told him as we dressed. «Can we get something to eat near here?»

«There is a nice place quite near here. It is open all night.»

I had not taken much money with me, just enough for the room, and a present for Ebi which I had given him earlier. That left me, I reckoned, about seventy francs, plenty for our drinks and for a taxi to my hotel. Without knowing just why I did it I looked in my wallet.

For a moment I thought they must have fallen out, then I saw that Ebi was watching me, his face suddenly pale and anxious. And in that moment it was as if an icy hand had gripped my heart.

I could hardly speak. «Ebi... Ebi...»

Then he turned and ran from the room. A moment later I heard the street door slam.

I sat on the edge of the bed, feeling quite stunned. I just couldn't believe it, that this boy who had been so sweet could have robbed me, robbed me almost as he kissed me.

Suddenly I felt very old and tired.

At last I went slowly down the stairs and out into the night. I wandered aimlessly along, hardly noticing the direction. I could think only of Ebi and what he had done.

I suppose I had been walking for about ten minutes when I realised that I was being followed. I slowed down, then turned suddenly. A little way behind me was Ebi.

He ran to me and thrust some notes into my hand. I saw that he was crying.

He was shaken now by sobs, his face contorted with grief. When at last he spoke I could hardly catch what he said.

«You will meet me tomorrow? Please say you will. Please don't let this spoil it all. If you will meet me I shall know you forgive.»

«I'll meet you. Ebi. At the Flore, as arranged.»

He turned then, hurried away from me. I think he was still crying.

Poor kid, I realised that I must not judge him harshly over this. After all, he was poor, the money meant a lot to him. Well, tomorrow we would talk things over quietly. I would try to make him understand these things. That he had returned the money surely showed there was plenty of good in him.

But tomorrow found me far from Paris. When I returned to my hotel there was an urgent message for me to 'phone London at once. There had been sudden developments connected with my work, and it was necessary for me to be in London the next day. Some hectic telephoning secured me a seat on the first flight to London. It was only as we took off that I realised I could not meet Ebi that evening.

*

Back in London I was caught up at once in a round of business meetings and telephone calls. Even so, my thoughts went several times to Ebi. I hated to think of him waiting for me at the Flore, and I worried about the construction he would put on it when I did not turn up. At the first opportunity I sent him a telegram, explaining my recall to London and saying that I would write soon.

The pressure of work continued through the afternoon, and by the time I finished and got back to my flat I felt pretty tired. As I pushed open the door I saw a card lying on the mat. Attached to it was my telegram, and the card

stated that the telegram could not be delivered as the addressee was not known at that address.

What a fool; in my haste I must have filled in the address wrongly. But when I compared it with the slip Ebi had given me I found it was quite correct. Someone must have made a mistake, but it was too late to rectify it now.

I would write to him that evening, explaining everything. But meanwhile there was the immediate problem that I could not keep my date with him. Somehow it had become desperately important to me that the boy should not wait for me at the Flore, eventually deciding that I had not met him because of what he had done.

At last it seemed to me that there was only one thing I could do. I must telephone Lance, and try to persuade him to keep my appointment and make my explanations.

It was a long time before I got through to Paris. I could hear Lance's telephone ringing, but he was slow to answer it. Then quite suddenly I heard his voice.

«Frank! But where are you ringing from?»

«London. I was recalled suddenly, and came over on the 6 a.m. flight.»

As always on the 'phone, Lance sounded rather unwelcoming, as if reluctant to open the door to some new uncertainty.

«Listen, Lance. You remember that Algerian boy I met when we were at the Flore?»

There was such a long pause that I thought we had been cut off. «Lance? Can you hear me?»

«Certainly I remember. What's up? What has he done?»

«It's nothing like that. I was to have met him this evening at the Flore, eight o'clock. Can you go there, explain what has happened, tell him I am writing!»

«I could never recognise him again.»

«Of course you could, you studied him closely enough.»

«But why bother? A boy like that is used to being 'stood-up'. When you don't turn up he'll assume you couldn't make it, or just didn't want to.»

«Look, Lance. This really is important to me. I can't explain now, it's all too complicated. But I do want him to know this evening why I couldn't meet him.»

«Oh, alright. Yes, I'll go, but I think you are being very dramatic about nothing.»

«Thanks, Lance. I knew you would help me. Let me have a few lines to say what happens.»

He said something I could not catch, then the line went dead. Well, that was that, I had done all I could.

Straight away I sat down and wrote a short letter to Ebi, telling him exactly what had happened, that I hoped to return to Paris quite soon, that the other little matter was of no importance, was forgotten. If there was anything to forgive then I forgave him. I longed to see him again. I hoped he would write to me very soon.

I addressed the envelope with great care, copying his name and address from the slip he had given me, writing very clearly. This time there would be no mistake.

Several busy days passed before I heard from Lance. His letter was brief and to the point. Evidently he still disapproved.

«... I could not get to the Flore until just after ten. No sign of your Algerian friend. I waited some time, but he did not show up.

I don't know why you were so anxious about the broken date. My guess is that within a couple of hours he was in bed with someone else.

I hope you will not ask me to do anything further about this. I really would prefer not to.»

So poor Ebi had waited for me after all, and presumably had gone home at last thinking that I did not want to see him again. I felt that the boy was sensitive, and I hated to think that this had happened. Still, he would have received my letter. Probably I should hear from him soon.

But the next day my letter to him was returned. Scrawled across the envelope was one word: «Inconnu».

Surely I could not have made another mistake. There must be some misunderstanding at the other end. I addressed another envelope, put my letter inside, and posted it. After five days it was returned. This time «Inconnu» was scrawled very heavily across the envelope, and underlined several times.

I felt now that I had come up against a blank wall. Obviously the address I had was not the right one.

By now I felt very worried. Was I perhaps being foolish, as Lance had said, unduly dramatic? But the more I thought about Ebi, the more I felt that he would have taken this very hard. He would have felt that because of his theft I was finished with him. I simply could not get the boy out of my mind. I felt that in some way I simply must let him know that he was forgiven, that nothing was changed between us.

But at the same time doubts began to crowd in. Had I not detected Ebi in several lies, not important in themselves, but still lies? He had told me that he was twenty, but he looked several years older, and indeed a casual remark made later suggested that he was more like twenty-three. He had told me also that he was a student, but his heavy muscles and calloused hands suggested that he did some hard physical work.

Gradually these small doubts seemed to fit together to form a picture. Had he in fact always planned to rob me? Was this false address a ruse, a deliberate deceit? I remembered that he had always been anxious that I should not call at the address. Remembering the boy, his charming ways, all this seemed improbable. And yet... and yet...

I am in Paris as I write this, my heart heavy.

Today I went to the address he gave me, an ugly house in an ugly street. I walked past the house several times before at last I knocked. A cold wind blew the dust in my eyes as I waited for an answer.

A woman stared at me, her face hard, hostile as I asked for him.

«There is nobody of that name here.»

I showed her the slip of paper.

«I remember now, there was a letter, from England, I think. It was returned. He is not known here.»

«Do you perhaps know of him, a young Algerian?»

«Certainly no Algerian is known here.» Her face seemed to have grown more hostile. As I moved away I felt that she was watching me.

I tried several more houses in that long, unfriendly street. Always the same result. Unknown, unknown.

Tonight I shall return to the Flore. I shall spend another evening waiting, waiting, always scanning the faces for the one I love and want so badly.

Where are you, Ebi? Shall I ever find you again? Shall I ever learn the truth of this? Or must you remain forever «inconnu»?

Discomfited Diehards?

Despite the newspaper headlines the Lords' second reading debate on the Criminal Justice Bill on Monday turned out to be largely (and significantly) a liberal occasion. If the floggers intend to make capital out of Lord Parker's case for the return of corporal punishment, they will find that they will have to be very careful about quoting him. The Lord Chief Justice emphasised that the fundamental principle in treating young offenders should be primarily remedial: in common with the anti-floggers, he came out in support of the Boston experiment, under which young delinquents spend two hours every weekday evening for up to three months in compulsory training. It emerged, too, that while Lord Parker believed corporal punishment to be a definite (but ill-defined) deterrent, one of his chief concerns was to avoid the necessity of passing three to five-year sentences on young men under 21, some of whom might still be completing their education. To avoid excessive caning or birching, he was prepared to restrict the power to quarter sessions and assizes.

The straightforward flogging peers had no truck with this moderate language and contrived, as a result, to present their argument at rather a greater disadvantage than usual. Lord Ailwyn trenchantly contended that «cissy» treatment inexorably edged the young criminal towards the shadow of the gallows (a shadow that he wanted to extend to cover not only all murderers but those convicted of «other revolting and diabolical crimes.») Lord Fortescue derived obscure encouragement from the «common knowledge» that «hanging did away with sheep stealing in a very few years.» *Nowadays there was «a simple operation» that should be performed «when a sexual or homosexual crime is repeated.»* (As it happened, the House had just heard that sexual offences were the only major category of criminal offence that actually declined last year.) The birching judges must often sigh over the enthusiasm of their noble friends.

Lord Stonham used the Pakenham-Thompson report to insist on more after-care for prisoners: at present, he said, the country spends £ 15 million a year in keeping men in prison and less than £ 250,000 in helping them to stay out.

(«Economist», London.)