

Zeitschrift: Der Kreis : eine Monatsschrift = Le Cercle : revue mensuelle
Band: 30 (1962)
Heft: 11

Artikel: There's a first time for everyone
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-569834>

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There's A First Time for Everyone

by Frank Whitfeld

It was when I was clearing out an old trunk that I came across something I had not seen for years, in fact at first I could not think what it was. And then, suddenly, I remembered, and in a flash memory took me right back to a summer before the second world war, to Monaco, when I was seventeen and abroad for the first time.

And as I write this, all the years between seem to have dropped away. I remember it as vividly as if it had happened yesterday. The night journey from Paris, not tiring when one is seventeen, just wonderful and exciting, one hardly wanted to sleep for fear of missing something. Dawn, the gradual lightening of the landscape; breakfast, while the strengthening sunlight gilded everything, and one became aware of the wonderful, glowing warmth of the south; the long, long morning as the train eased its way lazily along the golden coast, seeming no longer to have any need for haste; and at last stepping out into the brilliance and heat of a Mediterranean noon.

My hotel was quite near the station, small, rather elegant, run by two delightful American women. Lesbians, I realise now, but I don't imagine that such an idea occurred to me then.

I was charmed with my bedroom, and was delighted to find that it had its own little bathroom. Excitedly, I unpacked, and then suddenly felt so sleepy that I had to sit down and close my eyes. When I next opened them, I discovered that I had slept for nearly an hour. I still felt heavy and very hot, but a cold shower refreshed me. Then I slipped on my coolest things and went down to lunch.

I suppose I remember the small, cool dining-room so well because it was here that I first saw him. I hesitated in the doorway, all the tables seemed to be occupied, and I wondered where I should sit. Then I was shown to a small corner table. I expect I was a little shy, because I think I had been there some time before I took stock of the others in the room and decided that I was the only Englishman there.

My first awkward moment arose when the waiter asked me what I would drink. My knowledge of wines in those days was absolutely nil, and I had never taken wine with lunch in my life, so I told him I would not take anything. A furtive glance round the room when he had gone revealed the reason for his polite incredulity, for indeed there was wine at every other table. I had decided that I had better explain my ignorance, and let him choose something suitable for me, when the man at the next table leaned towards me, smiling.

«The English are not great wine drinkers, but here, where it is so good, so cheap... Can I persuade you to try a glass of mine?»

And before I had time to refuse, he had leaned across and filled my glass with a glowing red wine that certainly did look tempting.

«Try that; tell me how you like it.»

I was able to tell him quite truthfully that I did like it. I liked it very much indeed, even if it did make me feel a little light-headed. A second glass broke down my shyness, and soon we were in cheerful conversation. After lunch we took coffee together.

He was Hungarian, living and working in Paris, now on holiday in Monaco. I never had a photograph of him, and it is strange that after so long I am sud-

denly shown his face so vividly, the wide, rather sensual mouth, the black hair, slightly receding, the eyes large, dark and of extraordinary brilliance. I suppose one could not call him good-looking in any conventional way, but at moments his face would hold a strange beauty, and his expressions would change as swiftly as the shadow and sunshine of an English spring. The pain of things past would darken his eyes almost before present laughter died.

But all this I saw later, not in that first day when we talked lightly of trivial things. Presently I rose and asked him to excuse me. Delightful as our conversation was, the sunshine called me, I wanted to swim in the Mediterranean; not a moment of this precious holiday must be wasted.

I did not see the Hungarian, Tibor, again that day. At dinner the table next to mine was not occupied, and I felt a little disappointed. I would have enjoyed a further talk with him, perhaps a stroll through the warm, perfumed dusk. However, I managed to enjoy myself, strolling into Monte Carlo, eventually plucking up my courage to visit the Casino, where actually I won a little.

I wonder if I remember rightly when I think of my stroll through the Casino gardens afterwards as slightly sinister, as if voices from the darkness whispered to me, unseen hands reached out towards me. Maybe I was just tired, anyway I returned early to the hotel, and slept till morning.

It was wonderful to wake to another day of sunshine, and to think of all the pleasures ahead. I leapt out of bed, shaved, took a shower, hurried down to breakfast, but early as I was, Tibor had beaten me to it. He had finished his breakfast and was going through some papers. He greeted me with a friendly smile.

«So you are an early riser too?»

«I can't wait to get into that sea.»

«Did you swim yesterday?»

«You bet I did; I went to the Plage.»

«But you don't need to go there and pay. There are many places just as good where you can swim free. Look, I'm swimming this morning; come with me, that is if you'd like to.»

«Thank you, yes, I would. Anything to save my precious francs.»

«Splendid. Don't rush your breakfast, I shall be about half an hour. Shall we make it outside the hotel in thirty minutes?»

I can see so clearly in my mind the ridge of rocks he took me to, smooth, jutting right out into the sea. Already the sun was high in the sky, gloriously, brilliantly hot, and the sea was blue beyond belief. We seemed to have the world to ourselves.

We undressed quickly, and I remember the little stab of surprise with which I saw Tibor's lithe, muscular body, and realised that he must be younger than I had thought, certainly not more than thirty. He evidently swam a great deal, for he was tanned to a wonderful golden brown, and standing there beside him I suddenly felt my body to be shamefully white and inadequate. Almost as if he read my thoughts, he smiled at me, wrinkling his eyes in the bright light, and for an instant laid a hand on my shoulder. Then, like a flashing arrow, he had dived in, and I had followed.

We swam, floated, swam, the water so warm that it seemed one could stay in for ever. Tibor sang in a light tenor voice a snatch of some Tino Rossi song, and was delighted when I was able to join in. If only time could stand still, I thought, if this need never end. But at last, return to land we must.

«Race you to the rocks!» Tibor shouted, and homewards we started, flashing through the water, his brown body, my white one, neck and neck, laughing, straining, reaching the rocks almost together, then lying panting, laughing, while the hot sun dried us.

Then he sat up and looked down at me. «You don't get much sun-bathing in England?»

«Not like this. What wouldn't I give for a sun-tan like you have.»

Suddenly I wanted to put out my hand and touch his warm, smooth shoulder, and I turned away quickly in case he should read this in my face. It seemed that in that moment I had been touched by a happiness deeper than I had thought possible.

«You had better be careful of that skin; don't overdo the sun-bathing at first.»

«It does get sore very easily.»

«Better use some of that oil, and only have half an hour's sun this morning.»

I oiled my arms, legs and chest thoroughly, then he took the bottle from me. «Turn over; I'll oil your back.»

I lay face downwards on the hot rock, the sunshine beating down on me, while Tibor put the oil on my back and shoulders, gently rubbing it in. His hands seemed to have some strange power that made my body glow with a new life, so that I wished he need never stop. It was as if a door was being opened for me into some strange, wonderful, unknown place, as if I was really alive for the first time. Then at last he stopped, resting his hands for a moment on my shoulders.

«That should do the trick. Do that every day before you sun-bathe, and not too much sun until you are used to it.»

We lay side by side in that world of gold and blue, talking a little, sometimes half sleeping. I felt that we had been friends always.

I told him something of myself and my life. He told me how he had been obliged to leave Hungary for political reasons. He was a journalist, and luckily had been able to find work in Paris. At that moment he was writing a series of articles on the political climate of Europe. As it was just as easy for him to write here as in Paris, he planned to spend most of the summer in Monaco.

«No wonder you have that perfect sun-tan. What can I hope to do in ten days?»

Presently he made me put on my shorts and wrap a towel round my shoulders. «I've seen enough of what the sun can do when you're not used to it.» Usually I rather resented being made to do things, but just then it seemed quite wonderful to have someone to look after me.

That afternoon we swam again, and in the evening wandered into Monte Carlo, visiting several strange little bars where Tibor seemed to be well known. We drank various things that made me feel exhilarated, on top of the world.

«Don't worry, I will not let you get drunk.» Tibor said, laughingly. «In any case, I think it is time I was in bed, if my article tomorrow is to make any sense.»

Outside my room Tibor paused, taking my hands warmly in his. «Goodnight, my friend from England,» he said. «Sleep well, with pleasant dreams.»

«Thank you for a wonderful day. I've loved every moment of it.»

«Well, tomorrow is another day, if you would like to do the same again.»

Then he pressed my hands, and went on to his own room.

Inside my room, I threw myself on the bed, my heart pounding wildly. I felt so happy, it had been such a perfect day. And yet... had I hoped for something else, something I would not let myself admit? Had I thought, hoped that he...? No, of course, I had just imagined something, some special meaning in the way

he had looked at me once or twice. There was nothing he had said or done to make me think . . . I must put such ideas from me.

«Tomorrow is another day.» he had said. Yes, another wonderful, exciting day. And soon I slept.

And the next day *was* wonderful. And the day after that, swimming, lying in the sun, talking, talking. It seemed to me that Tibor could be interesting on any subject under the sun, his quick, alert mind always getting to the heart of things. He could be enormously amusing, then in a moment deadly serious, almost tragic sometimes. And it was at those times that his eyes became so large, so dark that I felt I could read in their depths strange and tragic truths even beyond all he told me. He spoke several times of the inevitability of war, and of all it could mean to Europe. I suppose I hardly believed him then, though when the storm did break I was to remember what he had said.

He urged me more than once to see some of the wonderful places round about, not to waste my holiday just swimming and sun-bathing, but the sea and the sun seemed to have taken hold of me, and I suppose too I found his company so fascinating, for three days passed in the same delightful way, and the district remained unexplored.

After dinner on that third day, however, we did decide to take a bus along the coast to Nice, or possibly further. We had finished dinner, and were more or less ready to start when quite suddenly, without warning, the rain came. I had never seen rain to equal it, it looked almost like steel rods coming down out of the clouds, and in a few minutes the street outside looked like a lake. We could hear the thunder growling in the mountains, and every few minutes vivid lightning seemed to tear the sky in shreds.

«Well, there goes our excursion.» said Tibor.

«Surely it can't go on like this for long.»

«Several hours, maybe. But don't worry, the real storm is up in the mountains; tomorrow will be fine again.»

I suppose the idea of rain there had never occurred to me, but it certainly was spectacular, and for a while I enjoyed watching it, until I began to resent a wasted evening. The heat seemed to have become more intense, the air quite stifling. I paced the lounge restlessly, while outside the rain continued to cascade down.

«It's no good,» said Tibor presently, «you can't go out this evening. What about a game of chess?»

I was no chess player then, I knew moves but not much beyond that. However, I agreed, and he fetched his little pocket set, the men beautifully carved in ivory, quite exquisite.

«A present from my father,» he told me. «The last he gave me; I have it with me always.»

It took me just about three minutes to see that I was hopelessly outclassed. The game opened up, and I felt I was not doing too badly, then suddenly a knight appeared from nowhere: «Check.» — Retreat the only answer.

His queen flashing down upon me, cold and sinister: «Check.»

Retreat again, only one move possible.

Once more the queen: «Check. I'm afraid it is mate.» — And mate it was.

«Oh dear, I'm afraid I didn't do very well.»

«Not very, but you haven't played recently.»

Presently we played again; I did no better.

«I'm sorry, Tibor, I can't give you a game.»

«You'll improve. Your attack is quite good, but your defence is weak.»

He gave me a few hints, then we played again. No doubt he was lenient for I got on better, and the game lasted much longer before he finally trapped me.

We smoked and talked for some time, and had a few drinks. Outside, the rain was relentless, though the thunder had died away to an occasional muttering.

«One more game?»

«Just one, and this time look out, I'm going to beat you.»

Tibor's hints and the experience of the other games had certainly helped me. I felt more confident, and seemed to be able to see ahead much more clearly. Whether Tibor was really concentrating I can't be sure but I had a thrilling moment of triumph when I captured his queen.

He looked at me, smiling. «Now you are showing me. Your attack is good, but watch your defence.»

The game settled down to a real struggle. I don't think I really thought I could win, but I was determined to give him a real fight. We played slowly, concentrating hard, and I was quite amazed when I looked at my watch to see how late it was. I noticed that the waiter seemed to hovering somewhat.

«I say, do you think he wants to put out the lights?»

«Look at the time! Yes, I think he does.»

«We could finish this upstairs. We can't leave it now.»

«Better make it in your room,» he said as we mounted the stairs, «mine is rather small.» Then, as I opened the door for him to go in: «My word, they have done you proud. A double room all to yourself.»

I put the chessboard down carefully on the bed. «Sorry there isn't a table. Can you manage like this?»

Though the windows were as wide open as possible, with the curtains drawn back, the room was very hot and airless, and soon Tibor took off his shirt. At once I felt my old admiration, even envy, I suppose, for his strong, tanned body. I longed to take my shirt off too, yet somehow felt a sudden shyness that prevented me.

It was my move, but my concentration seemed to have been broken. I stared at the board, quite unable to remember what I had been planning downstairs. I felt that Tibor was looking at me searchingly, but I kept my gaze on the board. At last I made a move, and at once knew that I had made a fatal mistake. From that moment the game began to go against me.

I fought hard, but it was like wrestling with someone not only stronger but much more skillful. We played on with grim concentration, and the game now seemed to have developed a deeper significance, as if Tibor felt that winning would also decide something much more important. Several times I looked up and found his great dark eyes looking at me with an expression I could not understand. I began to be very nervous, playing desperately hard, feeling that he must not beat me, somehow I must prevent it. Then quite suddenly I remembered that first morning together, for a moment I seemed to be back on that sun-baked rock, I remembered the feel of his hands as he rubbed the oil into my shoulders, and then everything changed, I wanted him to win, wanted him to beat me whatever added significance it might have.

«You have no defence,» he murmured, «Attack yes, but your defence is so weak.»

I made another nervous, unplanned move. Two minutes later it was all over.

I lay back on the bed with a sigh of relief. The tension had eased, as if something in dispute had been decided.

Tibor put the chessmen away and closed the board, then looked at me with a smile.

«We must play again. Soon you will be beating me.»

For a few minutes there was silence, but in those minutes something had started that I could not stop. Abruptly Tibor rose, and crossing to the windows closed the curtains. Then turning, he held out his hands to me. As if in a dream, I stood up and went to him, my heart pounding violently. His eyes seemed darker, more enormous than ever, with again that expression I could not fathom. Then without warning he kissed me on the mouth, holding me to him fiercely, pressing his mouth to mine so hard that I thought my lips must bruise. Part of me, in panic, wanted to fight away from him, but I stayed still, and at last he released me.

»I had to do that; I've wanted to ever since that first time we swam together.»

I couldn't speak. I tried to smile at him, but even that I couldn't manage.

«Did you mind? Did you hate it?»

I shook my head, half turning from him. I felt his hands gently taking the clothes from me, moving me to the bed. I realised I was trembling as I felt the splendour of his body against mine.

«Is this the first time?» he whispered presently.

I nodded, I could not speak.

«There's a first time for everyone,» he said softly. «I promise you it shall be very good.»

We must have slept at last, for I remember waking to find myself held closely in his arms, so secure, so perfectly happy that I hardly dared breathe lest I wake him and end it all. I knew then the absolute luxury of sharing a bed with someone one loves.

When at last I did move to ease a cramped arm, he sighed and held me more strongly. I lay there quietly, content to be with him, remembering how kind, how splendid he had been. Gradually it began to grow light. Tibor had been right, it had stopped raining, today would be fine again, the sea, the sun would be there to delight us, this wonderful new happiness would still be mine.

And then, with a shock, I remembered that Edward was arriving, and as I remembered this it was as if a shadow had blotted out the sun.

Edward was the friend with whom I was spending this holiday. At the last minute some business matter had delayed him and I had had to come out alone. It was unkind and ungenerous of me to feel that way about his arrival. I really liked him very well, and had been only too pleased at the prospect of his company on the holiday. But now my meeting with Tibor had changed everything, and I quite resented the thought of having to spend my time with Edward. I drew Tibor even more closely to me, in a panic that this would no longer be possible between us. But somehow, somehow I must make it possible.

I think I was very near to tears as I lay and looked at Tibor in that dim light, the face that had become so dear to me, the dark hair, usually so trim, now unruly, his features calm, untroubled in sleep. Turning slightly, I put my mouth gently against his in a kiss that I wished could be unending. At last I saw that he was awake, was looking at me, smiling sleepily.

«What's the matter? Can't you sleep?»

«Tibor,» was all I could whisper, «Darling Tibor». And as he wakened, we loved again, most wonderfully.

When I next awoke it was broad daylight. Tibor was propped up in bed, smoking a cigarette. He grinned at me and blew some smoke in my eyes.

«What's happened to the early riser today?»

I grabbed at him, and laughingly we wrestled for a few minutes. «No rising at all today,» I told him. «I'm going to keep you here, a prisoner.»

We lay together, each renewing his memory of the other, reliving past pleasure, then he put me firmly from him.

«No more,» he murmured, «Not now. There is so much time ahead, so much happiness for us.»

Then he kissed me swiftly and sat up, swinging his legs to the floor.

«You have how long left? A week? It must not be wasted. Each day I shall take you somewhere, show you something that you can remember back in England. This evening I will take you to a restaurant right up in the hills, very nice, very expensive, but who cares? The view is superb, you can see the lights all along the coast past Nice in one direction, the lights of Italy in the other. We will dine there, we will celebrate with a really good wine. You will like that? For this morning and after lunch we can swim. Then tomorrow...»

I put my hand on his arm, running my fingers gently over his firm muscles. «Tibor,» I said with difficulty, «I am not sure about this. You see, today Edward, my friend, arrives from England.»

He looked at me swiftly in astonishment, almost as if I had struck him.

«Your friend? What friend is this? You have told me of no friend.»

His eyes had become huge and brilliant again, searching my face, looking, it seemed, for some truth beyond what I would tell him.

«He is the friend with whom I arranged this holiday. We should have travelled out together, but he was delayed.»

«You told me nothing of him.»

«No, I suppose I didn't. These days have been so wonderful I think I had almost forgotten it myself.

«And he arrives today?»

«He'll be here in time for lunch.»

He moved across the room, and started putting on his clothes quickly. I could see that he was very angry. Even in my distress I had to admire his light, easy movements.

«Tibor,» I said. «It will not make any difference, I promise you that.» I went across to him, but he turned slightly from me.

«Oh no, it will not make any difference, of course.»

«He is very nice, easy to get on with, I know you will like him. He will be delighted for you to do everything with us.»

«He will be delighted, I'm sure. Your lover will be charmed to have me *everywhere*, odd man out in bed while he makes love to you.»

«It's not like that, really it's not.» I put my hand on his arm but he shook it off fiercely. «We are just friends, there is nothing between us, nothing at all. Tibor, haven't I shown you that there is nobody, there couldn't be anybody, but you?»

He had finished dressing, and went to the door. When he turned, I could see that his face was white, even his lips seemed drained of all colour.

«I'm pleased to have been able to amuse you until the arrival of your friend. I apologise for having misunderstood the position. Please don't fear that he will ever hear of this little episode during his absence.»

«Tibor, listen please.» He moved down the passage and into his room, slammimg the door after him.

The tears that blinded me then were perhaps only the easy tears of boyhood, but as I sat there, I really felt as if my heart would break.

Edward arrived as expected, and I managed to greet him cheerfully. I was determined that nothing of this should spoil his holiday. As we walked across to the hotel I thought how quiet, how easy he was, kind and sensible. Surely when Tibor met him he would realise how mistaken he had been. The fault was entirely mine for having handled things so stupidly. I had known that Tibor was very temperamental, and should have had the sense to see that he might misunderstand. However, I felt certain that I could put things right, and he would see how much I had come to love him.

He was not at lunch. At first I felt disappointed, then I decided that it might be a good thing. By dinner time he would have calmed down, and I should be able to make him see the truth.

Edward and I swam that afternoon, but I took him to the Plage. Somehow I did not want to be with him in the places where Tibor and I had been so happy.

But at dinner the table next to ours was still empty, and once more I began to worry. Edward noticed that I was rather distract, and I feigned a headache. After dinner I persuaded him to go for a stroll without me, and I sat where I could watch the stairs, where I could not miss Tibor if he came in or went out.

I watched carefully, but by ten o'clock there was still no sign, so I went to the Reception desk and asked casually if they knew whether he was in his room.

The elder of the American women was at the desk, and she glanced at me shrewdly, but kindly, as if she understood more then I meant her to.

«Why, didn't you know, he has left. He had to return to Paris unexpectedly. He caught the evening train.»

I don't remember if I made any reply, I felt quite stunned by the news. Gone; I just couldn't believe it. I turned slowly away from the desk. Poor Tibor, poor dear, dear Tibor. How badly I had hurt him, the last person in all the world I would wish to hurt. Suddenly I felt desperately unhappy and lonely, I felt I just didn't know what to do.

«Oh, just a moment.» The American woman was calling me. «He left this for you. Sorry I did not remember it before.» She handed me a small parcel.

Almost in tears, I hurried up to my room and tore the parcel open. As I guessed, it contained the set of chessmen. There was a note, too.

«Please forgive me for this morning. I am deeply ashamed, for I want only for you to be happy. — This is to say goodbye; I have decided to return to Paris.

I do love you, my dear boy, but it is best that I should go. I am not the one to bring you lasting happiness. You have seen so little of my real nature, but there is a dark side you would hate and fear. Will you keep this, please? I hope it may help you to remember 'the first time'. Tibor»

«P.S. Your defence is stronger than I thought!»

I was still weeping bitterly when Edward returned, and I learnt that evening what a true and understanding friend he could be.

And now, so many years later, holding those charming chessmen in my hands, I do remember, dear Tibor. With the greatest happiness and affection I do remember that first time, and how your kindness and tenderness made it a beautiful thing.

As I turn the pages of my life, Tibor, that page is, I think, the sweetest of all..

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