

René

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RENÉ

by Frank Whitfeld

I suppose I was looking for adventure; why else would one sit on the terrace of the Flore? One can be sure of entertainment there, and amusement, but somehow that evening the gay tapestry did not charm me. I felt aloof and disinterested, in fact I was so immersed in my grey indifference that I did not even notice that the seat next to mine had been taken until I realised that someone had leant towards me and spoken.

But when I turned to the speaker I was so shocked by what I saw that no sense of the words came to me. I have never seen a face so drained of warmth and life, eyes so dark with misery.

«Forgive me,» I said, «I did not catch what you said. But excuse me, I think you are ill.»

It took him several moments to make the effort to speak again, and when he did it was as if his lips were numb.

«I asked you, Monsieur, if you would be kind enough to buy me a drink.» Then, seeing my hesitation, «You must understand that I have no money, none at all, otherwise . . .»

I could not turn from the almost transparent pallor of his face, the desperation of despair that had made a mask of his young features.

«You look quite ill. I think you should be at home.»

«It is nothing, Monsieur. It is . . . well . . . just that I have not eaten recently.» Yes, that was it, sheer hunger and fatigue, but surely something more.

At that moment I was able to attract the waiter's attention. «A coffee, please, with plenty of milk. And a cognac also.»

«You are most kind. I shall pay, of course, later.»

«As you have not eaten, I have ordered the coffee with plenty of milk. It will be easier to take.»

Neither of us spoke again until the waiter returned with the drinks, but the silence lay quite easily between us. I realised that my boredom had vanished. I was sufficiently a man of the theatre to appreciate the slightly dramatic encounter with its air of mystery.

«I think you might be wise to drink rather slowly,» I told him. «First a little coffee, then a little cognac, and so on.»

While he sipped his drink, I was thinking hard. What now? I had helped him in this small way, as indeed I would try to help anyone. Should I leave it at that? Instinct warned me not to get involved. I had only to murmur some excuse, pay for the drinks and leave; it was as easy as that. But if I did I knew I should be haunted by that sad young face, by the thought that I had turned from someone in trouble. Maybe I was a fool, but I could not just leave it there.

He had finished his drinks, and a little colour had come back to his face, but he smiled nervously, and refused when I suggested another. We sat there quietly, I suppose neither of us knew quite what to say. But it seemed not to matter.

«Well, I'm feeling hungry,» I said at last. «I hope you intend to eat this evening, for I should be pleased if you would join me.»

He flushed then. «Monsieur does not remember . . .»

«That you have no money? Well luckily I have. And as I detest eating alone . . .»

He smiled then, and for a moment looked almost happy.

«You are very kind to me. I shall be able to repay you soon.»

As we moved away from the crowded cafe, I was wondering where I should take him to eat. Suddenly he swayed, and only saved himself from falling by leaning against a tree. I saw that his face was white again, and he looked very ill.

«Just stay quietly.» I put my arm round him to support him. «I'll get a taxi. We had better go to my flat; it's quite near.»

He managed to climb the stairs to the flat, but at once he slumped into a chair. It was quite a warm evening, but I switched on the electric fire, then drew the curtains and switched on a small lamp. After a few minutes he opened his eyes and smiled at me ruefully.

«I'm so sorry. It's absurd, I'm never like this. I suppose it's just . . . If I may stay a little longer, then I'll go.»

«When did you last eat?»

He thought a little. «Do you know, I can't remember. Two days ago, I think, or possibly three.»

«Do you mind if we eat here?»

«Of course not, but . . .»

«I can manage something simple. I think that might be better for you.»

I thought for a moment he was going to protest, then: «Thank you. Only a very little, please. It's stupid, but I don't feel . . .»

He ate very slowly, which I suppose was as well, and did not manage to butter and strong coffee. He stared nervously when I wakened him, seeming not to know at first where he was.

«I've brought it on a tray; stay near the fire to have it. Can you manage?»

He ate very slowly, which I suppose was as well, and did not manage to finish it, though he did drink all the coffee. He took a cigarette too, and smoked it quickly, nervously.

It was some time before he spoke, and then not easily.

«I can never thank you enough for this. And I feel so damned ashamed. You see, when I saw you at the Flore I thought you looked . . . easy . . . good for a meal. I had to tell you that because you've been so good to me. I'm damned ashamed; I'd better go.»

«I should stay here quietly for a while. And look, maybe you did think I looked easy, but I know that a boy of your age doesn't get talking to a man of my age at the Flore just for conversation. Alright then, I *was* good for a meal, though as things have turned out it wasn't a very good one. But don't start being dramatic about it. As it happens, you did me a very good turn. I was bored and lonely. I've enjoyed this little episode, so don't feel you have to rush away until you feel able to. Just sit and relax, and give your tummy a chance to cope.»

He was looking considerably better for his meal, less drawn and tense. He was a good-looking boy, good hands, a sensitive face. His suit was quite a good one, though old.

«This having no money, and not eating for three days, do you feel inclined to tell me about it? Don't, unless you want to. But it does sometimes help.»

He thought about that, then: «It's not very interesting. The usual sort of story. I can't get work and, well, I just ran out of money. If you don't have money, you don't eat.»

His voice had grown harder, a little bitter. I felt there was more behind this than he had told me.

«So, I went to the Flore. I hoped to find someone like you to get myself

fed. Even, perhaps, to get hold of some money. You see, I'm not a very nice person».

He paused, then went on. «If I hadn't done that fainting act... I'd better go before you kick me out. Thank you for what you've done. If you will tell me your name and where this is, I'll pay you back somehow.»

He stood up, then sat down abruptly.

«Hell, I feel as weak as a kitten.»

«There's no need to go rushing off. When you really want to go, I'll get hold of a taxi. How far is your place from here?»

I would say that he smiled then, if it is possible to smile and still look so sad.

«You must be sensible about this,» I told him. «I'll get you safely home if it's the last thing I do.»

He did smile then, and I thought: «My God, you *are* attractive. I think you *had* better go soon.»

«No point in telling lies,» he said suddenly. «My place, as you call it, isn't anywhere. I was thrown out because I couldn't pay. They kept all my things; I have just what I stand up in.»

«This happened three days ago? Well where have you been?»

«Just slept rough; hundreds do, you know. Thank God it wasn't winter, but it was still bloody cold.»

«You mean that you've slept in the open for three nights?»

«And it's taught me one thing: I'm not as tough as I thought.»

«But... well, you're clean, you've shaved.»

«Spent my last on a wash and shave this evening. You see, I reckoned I wouldn't stand much chance at the Flore unless I looked fairly alright. And I thought it must be tonight, before my shirt got too bad. It might have worked, but I've messed things up properly.»

Suddenly he grinned ruefully at me.

«When you say you'll go, where will you go?»

«Oh, there's a wide choice. Under the Seine bridges is the most popular. Very healthy, you know.»

And even while my brain was warning me not to, I heard myself saying: «Well, tonight you're going to stay here. There's a small spare room with a bed. You're welcome, if you'd like.»

For a moment he said nothing, then he turned away from me and I realised that he was crying. I left him to it, and after a few minutes he pulled himself together.

«Sorry about the scene; all over now.»

«And you'll stay?»

«If you really mean it, my God, I will.»

«I'll just see to things. It's only a divan, but quite comfortable. I'll put out some pyjamas. I should turn in soon, you're all in. Would you like a bath?»

«Would I not!»

While he splashed in the bathroom, I got his room ready. Twenty minutes later he was in bed, looking flushed from the hot bath, looking younger too, and quite happy.

«I'll leave the door ajar. If you want anything, give me a shout. I have some work to do, I shall be up for ages.»

At the door I paused. «By the way, I don't know your name.» I told him mine.

«René. René le Duc.»

«Goodnight, René.»

I switched off the light, leaving just the bedside lamp burning. Presently I heard him switch that off. After that, not a sound.

I sat in my room for a long time. I tried to work, but could not give my mind to it.

What had I started? How far could I let it go? Tonight I had to let him have that room, I just could not have turned him out, but I must not let myself get involved. I liked René; I had to admit that I found him very attractive. But this flat was where I worked, where I must have peace and no distraction. No, tomorrow I would find a way to give him some money, possibly even help him to find work. It must end there.

I flicked on the radio, and found with pleasure that someone was playing piano music of Gabriel Fauré. Listening to the delicate, immaculate themes I forgot René, his problems and my own. It was not until the recital ended that I realised I had not eaten.

It was too late to cook anything, and I made do with some bread, cheese, fruit and coffee. When I had finished and cleared away, I went to the door of René's room, and listened.

No sound; he seemed to be sleeping peacefully.

I moved into the room, and stood hesitating.

The curtains were drawn back so that a faint light shone across his face as he slept. He looked quite beautiful, and movingly defenceless.

Then, as I watched, his eyes opened and stared into mine in a dazed way. Suddenly, with an abrupt movement, he sat up, yet seemed to be shrinking from me in panic.

«Not now,» he whispered. «Please not now. Tomorrow it shall be whatever you wish, but please not tonight.»

«I've startled you, René; I'm sorry. I felt perhaps you should have something to drink. Could you take some hot milk?»

«No, thank you, really, nothing.» His voice was calmer now, but still with an edge of alarm.

«I think it would be wise.»

When I came back with the drink he had turned on the light and was sitting up. He drank the milk gratefully, and ate several biscuits.

«You are a kind person, you really are spoiling me.»

I moved his cup to a side table, then sat on his bed and put my hand on his shoulder. At once he tensed up, seeming to press back against his pillows.

«Look, René, let's get something straight. I'm not the big, bad wolf. You need not even lock your door. When anyone comes to my bed it is at my invitation, and only when they come gladly and with pleasure. Right?» I ruffled his hair, and rose to go.

As I reached the door he called to me, motioning me back to the bed, to be seated.

«I want to tell you about myself, how I ended up like this.»

«Tomorrow, tell me tomorrow. You must get some sleep now.»

«I must tell you now, otherwise I don't suppose I ever shall. And I want you to know.»

«You don't have to tell me, but if you want to talk about it, I'm not a bad listener.»

And so he began to tell me, slowly, haltingly at first, then gradually with more confidence.

«It started when I learnt that my mother was going to marry again. I was eighteen, and since my father's death several years before, we had grown very close. I had no idea that she was in the least interested in anyone, and the news came as a frightful shock. However, at first it seemed that it would be alright.»

He paused, and seemed lost in his memories before he continued.

«I was surprised when I met him, he wasn't at all what I expected. He must be some years younger than my mother, not good-looking, yet attractive in an unusual way.

«Yes, I liked him at first, he seemed kind and was good fun. But I was wrong, he wasn't like that at all. He started treating my mother badly, and within a few months she had quite changed. She seemed to be cowed and afraid of him.»

His face had clouded as he told me this.

«For a time he was careful when I was around, and I could only suspect all this. But after a while he did not try to hide things from me, and bullied her even when I was there.

«I tried to stick it, but it became worse. One day, when my mother was out, I had a frightful row with him. I went for him. I've done a bit of boxing, and I thought I could teach him a lesson.»

He gave a hard little laugh there. «My God, what a fool I made of myself. He was much too strong for me, I had not realised that anyone could be so brutally strong. He just played with me, amusing himself until I was tired out, then gave me a good thrashing. I shall never forget lying on the ground, worn out and humiliated, while he laughed down at me.

«And then,» his voice faltered for a moment. «Then, quite suddenly, he knelt by me. I just couldn't believe what he wanted to do. I tried to resist him, but I was too tired and too unhappy. There was a contempt in his triumph that completed my degradation.»

I thought then that this was all he was going to tell me, but presently he continued.

«After that there were other times. I tried never to be alone with him, but he found ways to arrange this. Several times he came to me in the night, I would wake in the darkness and find him there. When I woke just now, I thought for a moment...

«I was terrified that my mother would find out. At first I fought him silently, desperately; I did not realise then that this pleased him, that to master me was part of his pleasure.»

He was silent again, I suppose remembering it all. Presently I prompted him: «What then?» I felt he needed to talk about it.

«Then, this is horrible, but I must tell you, then I discovered a change in myself. It makes me sick with shame to remember, but I... I found that now I wanted him, *wanted all that had been so vile and hateful*. I kept thinking about him, remembering every detail of what had happened. His limbs which had been so brutal were now splendid to me, even to think of them made me tremble with excitement. I found myself trying to please him, to entice him and make him want me. I expect that this will disgust you, but you may as well hear the truth.

«One night he had come to me, it had all been exactly as he liked. He seemed

in a very good mood, even affectionate in his strange way. Just as he was leaving, he stopped and came back to my bed and leant over me. I put my hands on his arms, running them lightly over his hard muscles. I tried to pull him down to me again, hoping that he was going to stay a little longer. He submitted laughingly, and I felt the excitement building up between us again, then he broke away and stood up.

'«Keep in good form,» he said suddenly. «You'll be seeing a lot of me from now on. You won't have much competition for a while.'

«I suppose he could see that I didn't get his meaning because he burst out laughing.

«Do you mean to say you haven't seen? Good Lord, don't you kids notice anything? Don't you know your mother's pregnant. She won't want to bother with me now.»

«Not bad, she's forty-four, you know,» he added. «So you are likely to be kept busy.»

He pinched me playfully, then turned and left me.

At first I felt quite stunned, then gradually horror and disgust seized me. For the first time I saw clearly the shameful position, that he and I . . . he and my mother . . . I seemed to see for the first time the body that I had grown to worship lying with her, possessing her.

I felt sick and wretched and desperately ashamed. Suddenly I felt I loathed him again, but much more I loathed myself and all that had happened. I paced up and down my room, trying to think, to decide, and at last I saw that I must get away. To clear out was the only way I could be sure of ending it. I knew that if I stayed I should never be able to break with him.

«I shoved a few things into a case, took what money I had, it wasn't very much. Before it was light I was on my way to Paris.»

He fell silent again, almost as if he had forgotten that I was there. I lighted a cigarette and gave it to him. He took it abruptly without thanks, and smoked it quickly as he had done before.

«And how about Paris?»

He gave a wry smile. «Paris has been a very salutary lesson. I soon learnt that I had no special talent and not very much ability. I got several jobs, and lost them. I would have tried anything, but nobody seemed willing to give me the chance. I began to feel very ill, very nervous, I couldn't seem to concentrate, I think that lost me the jobs. The rest you know. My money ran out; I was shown the street.»

He managed to raise another smile. «I can hardly claim to have captured Paris. Oh yes, the Flore. I hope you will believe that I hadn't tried this before. When I was absolutely desperate, I remembered something a boy had once told me. He looked as if he made a success of it; that's more than I've done. But please, please believe that this is the only time I've tried it.»

I could see that it was important to him that I should believe this.

«I believe you, René.»

«And that's all.» He sank back on his pillows, suddenly looking exhausted. And then: «No, even that's not all.» His voice was harsh, almost ugly. «I still haven't forgotten him. I still remember his power and splendour, and what was so ugly and yet so wonderful. I hate him, I do, I do; yet sometimes I still

seem to feel his fingers like steel round my wrist. I wonder if I really want to escape from him. One word, and I would go back to him.»

He closed his eyes, and I let him stay quietly for a short while.

«Thank you for telling me, René. Now try to get some sleep. About what you've told me, I shall never mention it, not even to you unless you want me to. Try not to feel unhappy about it. Things recede, you know; time does heal. Even in the morning it will be a little further away and won't seem so bad.»

I felt pretty tired myself by then, but sleep eluded me. I could think only of René, of the sad, unpleasant story he had told me, I turned over in my mind again and again the problem of what would happen to him now. I suppose it was nearly dawn when I slept.

I must have slept heavily, for when I woke it was broad daylight. Still half asleep I groped for my watch, but I had forgotten to wind it and it had stopped. Almost before I had realised that there was movement in the flat, there was a knock at my door and René came in carrying a tray.

«Good morning. I guessed you were still asleep so I made you some coffee. I hope that is right.»

I could hardly realise that this was the same boy I had worried about last night. Colour had come back to his face, and he looked radiantly well and happy.

«I thought it was time I looked after you,» he said, smiling. «Oh, I had a wonderful night, I slept so well, I feel splendid again.»

«You can certainly make coffee,» I told him. «Have you had some? Then fetch a cup and have it with me.»

«Thank you for being so patient last night,» he said presently. «I'm not going to start all over again, but telling someone about it, well... it's just as if a weight had been taken from my head. I shall never forget what you've done for me, never.» For a moment he laid his hands across mine.

«I'll just wash these things up and do a bit of tidying before I go.» He gathered up the cups and moved to the door.

«René.» He turned back towards me, questioningly.

«René, where will you go? Have you any plans?»

He shook his head, shrugged his shoulders.

«Something will turn up. Life brings good things as well as bad. It brought me you. Maybe my luck has changed.»

«Do you want to go? Do you have to? Look, René, I've had an idea; if you hate it, say so. I'm a terribly lazy person, with an awful lot of **work to do**. How would you feel about staying here for a while and, well, looking after me. You know, running this flat for me.»

«You mean you'll let me stay?»

«If you would like to. You would not be very tied, I eat out a great deal, this place is easy to run. Can you cook if I'm busy and want to eat here?»

By now his eyes were really sparkling.

«I love cooking; it's one thing I really can do. But you really mean this? You're not being sorry for me?»

«My dear boy, I'm the most selfish man in the world where my comfort is concerned. I can't think of anything more heavenly than being looked after.»

He came to my bedside again. «I will do my best, I promise you that. If you really mean to give me a chance, I'll see that you don't regret it.»

I suppose it was a crazy idea, and I was taking an awful risk, but it

worked, it worked wonderfully well. René certainly had a flair for domesticity, and he took the arrangement seriously. I never had to ask or tell him anything twice.

Within a month it seemed impossible that I had ever managed without him. Just at that time I was working desperately hard on the last act of a play that was to go into rehearsal very shortly. It had been produced with moderate success in London, but needed considerable alteration for Paris. Without René to take care of me I should certainly have neglected myself, done without proper meals, just let my life slide into semi-chaos. But he took me firmly in hand, ran the flat perfectly, came up with excellent meals exactly when I wanted them, even in some uncanny way anticipating my needs and wishes.

During these weeks warm affection had developed between us, and I will not pretend that there were not times when I longed for something more. But remembering that first evening and his shrinking from intimacy, I made no suggestion. If this was to be just a charming friendship — well, I must accept that.

Then, one evening, I had worked late, suddenly seeing just how to achieve that final climax I wanted to end the play, an unexpected twist on which I could bring down the curtain almost before the audience had taken it in. I lost all sense of time, coming down to earth with quite a shock when René put some coffee down beside me, then putting an arm round my shoulders gently took the pen from my hand.

«I can't let you work any more; you will be too tired to sleep.»

«I don't need to work on; it's finished.» I told him with a surge of exhilaration. «I think it's good. I feel it's just right.»

I read the last scene to him, and it sounded fine. He knew the play well by now, and I could tell he shared my new enthusiasm.

«You mustn't change it, not one word. It's quite perfect. And tomorrow you can rest; no work at all.»

There is nothing quite like the magic of writing that has run well, a wonderful feeling of release and completion.

«Are you happy here, René?» I asked him presently. «You don't regret coming here?»

He came and stood behind me, again putting his arms affectionately round me. «I don't really need to answer that, do I?»

«But *really* happy? *Absolutely*?»

He moved a little away from me before he answered. «Happy? Yes, oh yes.» Then he turned and moved back to me.

«Do you remember my first night here, when I thought . . . I thought that . . . Well, do you remember you said that people only came to you at your invitation, only if they came gladly and with pleasure?»

«I remember.»

«Sometimes one hopes and waits for an invitation that does not come.»

Suddenly he knelt by me, resting his head on my knee.

«How can one earn the right to such an invitation?»

«René,» I whispered, «My dear, dear René.»

That night, tenderly and beautifully, we became lovers.

I have no words to describe my complete happiness during the weeks that followed. It was as if a dark world was suddenly filled with warmth, colour, music, as if I had never really lived before. I think I did sometimes realise that I loved René more deeply than he loved me, though never in any way did he suggest

this. It was just something that I knew, but when one is so perfectly happy, one does not measure degrees of affection, and I felt confidently that René did love me, and was happy.

How different he was from the sad, ill boy I had first seen at the Flore. He was gay now, amusing, self-confident, and our serene, happy life together enhanced his looks, made him in my loving eyes so perfect that sometimes the whole thing seemed like some wonderful dream from which I must one day awake.

Yet there were times when I knew he had moved away from me; sometimes for just a few minutes, sometimes for a whole day he would seem lost to me, I would catch for a moment that old look of sadness, often gone almost as I was aware of it.

He seemed so happy in his new life with me that I felt it must be something to do with the past, some shadow that would not pass, some remorse or regret. I thought a great deal about this before I finally made up my mind to question him about it, and even then I waited several days before there seemed a good opportunity.

We had been to hear a performance of Verdi's «Otello», and returned to the flat exhilarated by the sweeping power of the drama and the magnificence of the music.

«René,» I said to him at last. «I know I promised never to mention the past, and I know that it is in no way my business, but I have wondered so often about your mother.»

He looked at me, quite startled.

«I wonder sometimes if you are still worrying about her. Have you ever written?»

«No. No, I haven't.»

«Don't think I'm trying to interfere, but don't you think perhaps you should? Your mind might be more at rest.»

He moved over to the window and stood there with his back to me, not replying.

«She doesn't even know where you are.»

«It's better that way.»

«Do you think it is? She still loves you, you know; all that happened hasn't changed that. She must be worried sick about you. Couldn't you send just a few lines to say you have a job here and that you are alright?»

It was a long time before he turned and moved back to me.

«Yes, I have thought about it and worried about her. It's just that . . . Look, I'll think about it, I really will. I know you're right, but . . .»

Two days later he told me he had written to her, and I felt that he was glad he had.

Then my easy spell ended, my play went into rehearsal, and in the long, hectic days that followed the whole matter passed from my mind. It was only when I was sorting out my letters one morning that I remembered again: there was one for René, addressed in strong, rather ugly writing. I tried to appear quite casual as I handed it to him, but my feeling of foreboding was confirmed when he went as pale as death, and without a word went to his room.

It seemed an eternity while I waited for him to return, and at last I went to his door, knocked and went in.

«Must be off now, René.» Then I paused, shocked by his expression.

«It's from *him*.» He was whispering so that I could hardly hear him. «It's from him; he orders me to return at once.»

He was shaking so violently that I had to take him to a chair and make him sit down.

«But, René, you mustn't let this upset you, he has no hold over you, he can't compel you to go back.»

«I knew this would happen. I should never have written.» His eyes were dark with some strange panic.

«Well, I'm the fool to blame for that. But everything's alright, René. I'll look after it all. He can't do a thing.»

I managed to get him calmer at last.

«I must dash now, I'm frantically late. Now put it right out of your mind, and this evening we'll decide just what to do.»

It proved to be one of those days, everything that could possibly happen did, and I was much later than I expected when I got back to the flat.

Thank Heaven for René, I thought as I let myself in. To have to cope with things after today would be the absolute end. Then I paused in surprise, the flat was quiet and dark.

«René,» I called. «René.» But I knew he wasn't there.

I hurried to his room, gripped by a chill of anxiety. I think I knew, even before I looked, that I should find all his things had gone.

I don't know how long I stood there as bleak depression mounted in me. And suddenly I seemed to hear again his voice of despair as he had said on that first evening: «Even that's not all. I still haven't forgotten him. I wonder if I really want to escape from him. One word, and I would go back to him.»

When at last I found his note, my eyes were so filled with tears that I could hardly read it.

It just said: «I must go. Please forgive me, and try to understand.» He had scrawled through a final short sentence; I think it was «God help me.»

That was three weeks ago. The flat has become a cold cheerless place where I just sleep and try to work. Every day I hope for a letter that does not come. When the telephone rings it is never the voice I long to hear. I cannot write to him for he never told me, I never asked him where his home is.

Usually I can't stand the aching loneliness of the evenings, and go out somewhere to forget him. Fool that I was to make him write that letter. What have I done to him? What hell have I sent him to?

Now I can't even see his face. I try and try, but between us always comes that pale mask of misery I first saw at the Flore.

It is very late now, and quiet, so that I can hear the sounds in the streets quite plainly. From time to time I hear footsteps, and I listen desperately, waiting for them to pause, then to sound on the stairs, but always, always they pass on.