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May Wine

The friendship began with a «letter to the editor» in an international music magazine. The writer was a young American music critic; were there other young people in other parts of the world similarly interested, and would they care to exchange letters? There were; he knew there would be.

The lonely like to write letters. He was sure he was not the only one to find friendships, however tenuous, through the mails. And some of them did endure.

There was mystery—and security—in «postal acquaintances». You could tell as much or as little as you wished, although often one culminated such correspondences with a rather complete confession of one's personal life. Was it really the desire for self-destruction, as some psychiatrists said—this risking of reputation with unseen strangers? He doubted that—in his case «confessions» usually elicited responsive admissions and a quick rapport was established.

His luck really had been phenomenal. Of four replies to his invitation to write, three were from young men and one from a Swiss girl. It took only a couple of letters to determine just how much he had in common with two of the men, one in London and one in Vienna. He felt this second trip abroad would not be a lonely one.

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Paul was a law student in Vienna, when he wasn't working at one or another of several jobs. It was difficult to decide just how Paul kept body and soul together, but with his obvious knowledge of languages he probably was an interpreter. He was musical, that much was apparent—his letters «dropped» names of the great and near-great in Viennese musical circles and he did some music criticism for one of the newspapers there. That's how he was able to hear so many operas: complimentary press tickets.

Those wonderful letters made Vienna seem a fantastically intriguing city, but how could they have prepared this expectant visitor for the thrill of a million jewel lights that spilled along the Danube below as John's suddenly silent airliner glided in for a landing. London seemed too calm, Paris too blasé, Milano too modern, compared to this magical metropolis he was seeing at last.

He was enchanted in the air; he was captivated on the ground. Going through customs actually was pleasant, the treatment royal contrasted to the irritations in France and Italy at every border crossing. A courteous officer even had a beautifully printed brochure on Vienna ready to hand him as he completed a cursory inspection. And the hour was late.

It was the late hour that gave John some trepidation as he stood, feeling a little lonely for the first time, in the city air terminal, wondering where Paul was. Should he have expected Paul to wait for a late plane at this time of night? Yes, he had to admit that he had expected it. It wasn't typical of John, but recklessly he had not made hotel accommodations, thinking—hoping—he'd be invited to stay with Paul.

«I'm sorry, there is no one listed by that name,» the airlines clerk said as he leafed through a telephone directory. Suddenly he looked up from the book and frowned. «But you must be Mr. Graham—I have a message for you! A young man left this for you this afternoon,» he added, handing John a letter. «I beg your pardon—I had quite forgotten.» The apology was profuse—and the blushing smile charming.

But the note (a sudden pounding of the heart)—no, the note from Paul was reassuring: he would be late but he would indeed be there. He had hardly finished reading it when a fair-haired young man of about 24 approached and asked the question to which he seemed already to know the answer: «You are John, aren't you?»

There was an exciting atmosphere at the meeting—a blend of warmth, some embarrassment, wonder (was he really here—in Vienna?), mystery (Paul—so good-looking: why is he still unattached?), and physical attraction. He liked Paul instantly—he hoped that Paul liked him as much.

Self-conscious talk—how was the trip? Not feeling ill?—Good! Did he enjoy Italy? Surely he would like his stay in Vienna—and then a hasty and embarrassed explanation that Paul lived with his grandparents on Wieglgasse—a tiny apartment with hardly enough room for the three, with no spare beds. So, with the help of the airlines clerk a room at the Hotel Post was finally located—there was an agricultural convention in the city and rooms were at a premium. A quick bite to eat at a nondescript neighborhood cafe preceded the rather strained good night—it was late and they were both tired.

But for John sleep did not follow exhaustion. Half-waking, half-dreaming, he fancied he heard music in the warm night—not the lovely Strauss waltzes, no beautiful «Rosenkavalier» melodies, but the anguished cries of «Der Prozess».

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The day was perfect—how else could he describe it? John perhaps was not the typical tourist, and this day was not one for that figment of the travel agent's imagination. Yes, there were the Hofburg and Schönbrunn and the Belvedere to see, the Danube to splash your hand in, the Ringstrasse to trod—even time to sample a few shops. But nothing seemed pressing when they found a comfortable seat in a coffee house. There would always be time tomorrow to «do» the Prater; for now, coffee with whipped cream seemed so much more important.

Time is never lost in Vienna, he had read somewhere—it is only gently mislaid. You can hear the past whispering «never mind» when more urgent matters prod your guilty conscience as you sit idling away an hour over a croissant, scanning the spires of Stephansdom and letting your mind travel back to the time of the Hapsburgs.

And the night? It was perfect, too. Paul suggested something special for dinner—a trip up into the hills above the city, to Cobenzl, to dine al fresco on a terrace overlooking once more the artificial stars of Vienna's night lights. Viennese cuisine and a bottle—or was it two?—of May wine produced a camaraderie which encouraged talk, and John found the courage to ask some of the questions he'd had on his mind for many months. Some questions, of course, must wait.

Paul was charming, in a perfectly natural way—he was not the suave Continental, with only the «right» things to say for every occasion at his lips. But there is something special about the Viennese, John thought—«It can't be just the wine that makes me feel this mellow. It's this wonderful boy sitting across this enchanted table, reflecting kindness and interest—he really is interested in me, I can feel it.» He touched Paul's hand, without thinking that someone might see and not understand—or understand too well. Paul didn't move his hand away.

«I don't have to tell you how wonderful this evening has been, do I?» John said, realizing that a good deal of the glow was indeed from the wine. Paul's smile was wonderful, but he said nothing, turning slowly to look out over the hills at the city. «This is a view that is very familiar to me, and yet I never tire of it. I don't believe I would ever be completely happy living anywhere else in the world,» he said. John could easily see why.

A strong evening breeze had begun to blow down the hillside and, despite the alcoholic glow, they were suddenly cool. Reluctantly, they left the lantern-lit table and made their way down to the street. It was only after getting to his feet that John knew how much wine he had drunk. He decided a taxi ride down into the city was the best thing.

In the cab he held Paul's hand and thanked him again for the day—thanked him with his formal English words but also silently with a heart suddenly full of warmth, responding throbbingly to this charming Viennese youth who sat so quietly at his side. Their physical closeness enhanced John's alcoholic glow. The moment seemed magical.

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«It is rather late—I probably should go on home,» Paul said as they reached the hotel. But John brushed the suggestion aside and as they mounted the stairs he said, «I should have bought some of that wine to bring back with us—I'm losing some of my joie de vivre. Or is it gemutlichkeit? What does that mean, anyway?»

The maid had raised the window in the room and interesting night noises were filtering up from the street. John sprawled on the bed and smiled up at Paul, feeling suddenly dizzy. He was flushed and excited, reckless, ready. He unbuttoned his shirt and said slowly to Paul, «Sit down,» and as Paul chose the straight-backed wooden chair, added, «No—here,» patting the bed beside him.

As Paul hesitated, John was suddenly on his knees on the floor in front of him, claiming the hands Paul held at his sides. This didn't seem to be the moment for embarrassment—anyway, John was light-headed, there was no question about it now, and the words rushed out—words he had wanted to say for hours now.

«Paul, this probably seems silly, but I know I love you—it didn't even take me a whole day to find that out. It's crazy to talk about the future now, but I just wanted you to know I love you.» He pulled himself up and clung to Paul, who still stood stiffly in front of the chair. «It's not just the wine,» John whispered as he put his arms around Paul and dropped his head to Paul's shoulder. «It's not just the wine. Won't you kiss me?»

Paul gently held John to him and said, «I should have told you that I am not free. I live with an artist—he designed the Vienna Festival posters I showed you this afternoon. I am sorry—I know I should have told you last night.» Helplessly, he patted John's back.

John didn't move. He seemed not to have taken in the meaning of Paul's words. He didn't raise his head from Paul's shoulder, but repeated, with his mouth muffled against Paul's neck, «Won't you kiss me?»

Paul sighed and pulled gently away. «I am in love with someone else, John. I am sorry. I can't love you—you would not want just the body, would you?»

John's frame shook with a hard sob and he swayed against Paul, catching him suddenly off balance. Awkwardly, they both half-fell to the bed. «Please kiss me, Paul.» John pleaded, pulling Paul to him by the shoulders. «John . . .» Paul's protest was smothered by John's swift kiss.

As suddenly, John jerked away, turning his head to obscure a twisted smile and tears that welled in his eyes. «May wine,» he said slowly, «you taste like May wine.»

by J. G.

The Young Hercules

At last! Once again in Paris, Alex thought, as he got out of the bus that had brought him in from Orly to the center of the city. Eight days in Paris! No office, no mask to wear, no steps to watch—just eight wonderful days in Paris. Well, off to the hotel: a bath, change clothes, have dinner, and then look up the existentialist bar whose address had been given to him by some friends at the last minute before he left. One would really be with his own there. It had only been open a couple of weeks, but it probably wouldn't be long before it would have to close. The entertainment . . .

A few hours later Alex found the side street, walked down the short flight of stairs and opened the door. It was still early in the evening, but he knew that so much noise could only mean a full bar. The ceiling was already obscured by a dense layer of gently shifting cigarette smoke. At the end of the long cellar he could make out a low podium built out into the room. It was surrounded by a bright red curtain, and Alex guessed that it must be the small stage. There must be one more place, he thought, as he stared about the room. He realized that he was being stared at by quite a few people, and he was just about to become uncomfortably self-conscious when he caught sight of the waiter motioning to him. He walked the length of the bar to a chair that the waiter had placed at the table of two lovers directly in front of the stage. Waiters have a talent, he thought. He smiled, and their friendly return convinced him that they were really happy to share their table. The elder who wore the full mosaic beard that was so popular these days looked to be in his middle thirties. Alex also noticed the long red fingernails and dark blue eye shadow of the companion: the boy looked in his early twenties. Alex ordered Champagne.