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The House on the Rue Erlanger

It was only a single piece of notepaper this time, scrawled in his unreadable handwriting and his abominable French, but I managed to decipher it, for I had grown accustomed to it over the years. «When you come to Paris next week, don't stay at your nasty little hotel. Come stay with me on the rue Erlanger. My nephew is here with me at the moment from Poland, but you can have the blue room. And then we can discuss at leisure the opening of the travel agency.»

Just like him, of course. A European can smell American money clear across the Atlantic. I had made the mistake of telling him that I was at loose ends and looking for something to do. And he had already found a project—his project—for my little money. Well, we would see about that. But I was surprised that he should invite me into the old house, for in all my travels to Europe, I could count less than a half dozen times when I had been invited into a person's home.

And so it was that when I left the Aerogare at the Invalides, I gave the taxi driver the address of the old house. It was a dark November evening, and raining, and the old nostalgia quivered and rose within me as we swept break-neck through the Place de la Concorde, with the cars hurtling by, and the street-lights cutting daggers of light deep into the wet black asphalt of the streets.

I was lost in the west side of Paris, but the driver must have been an honest man for it did not take us long, through tunnels garish with orange lights, past all the shops that looked so dear and familiar, and on into the comparative quiet of Auteuil. The taxi stopped in front of the high iron fence, a solid black thing up to eye level, then branching into iron rods ending in pointed spikes. The house looked dark and foreboding; only a single light shone, high in the middle of the facade, an oval window like a Cyclop's eye directly under the roof—Prik's room.

His name had originally been Prikorszczewicz—which was entirely too much for any European except the Poles, so he had shortened it. The Americans whom he knew had a lot of fun with his abbreviated version. Just why he should have picked that spelling was a mystery, because he knew a little English. But Prik he chose, and Prik he was.

I paid the man and off he went into the dark channel of the street; then all was quiet. The rain dripped desolately from the near-naked branches, and the sidewalk was thick with fallen leaves. I pushed the bell, frustrated, for I knew that he could not hear it on the third floor. I waved my arm above the solid part of the fence.

It must have been at least ten minutes, a long wet ten minutes, that I stood there vainly signalling. And then I saw a dark shadow in the window next to the lighted oval one and I waved again frantically. The bedroom light went on. A head looked out, and Prik gestured to show that he had seen me. Even at that distance of a hundred yards, I could make out the familiar white flattened napkin tied around his head, which he always wore while in the house. Asked about it, he would bristle, and say it was to keep his hair from falling into the cooking. But it was always soaked in salad oil, and the truth was that he had read somewhere in an old book of Polish folk remedies that it helped to prevent baldness. Several years of wearing it had not noticeably kept his hair from falling out; each year his widow's peak grew greyer and thinner, while the hair crept back on each side of it.

The light came on in the vestibule, and Prik hurried out to unlock the front gate, swearing in French at the 'dirty weather'. Instead of greeting me, the first thing he did was scold:

«If you had called me from the Aerogare as I told you to, you wouldn't

have had to wait. I've been running to the window every two minutes for three hours.»

«That's two hours before you knew I was due,» I said. «And your two minutes are long—I stood there ten.»

Prik gave a double flouncy shrug to both shoulders, like an irritated housewife in a cheap domestic drama. «You should certainly have called,» he said. «Every two minutes for three hours.»

Like a woman, he had the faculty of not hearing what anyone said if it so suited his purpose, and most of his other thinking processes and reactions were feminine. This was odd, since he put such a high value on being a 'man' in all his appearances and actions, whether in bed or at a sidewalk café on the Champs Elysées. He was one who prided himself on doing only one thing to the young men he bedded with; and he boasted that he had never bowed his head, so to speak, in the worship of a handsome young man. And yet no one could camp louder or shriek more wildly than Prik when he was in the company of one of his goodlooking 'nephews' or 'cousins', feeling euphoric and forgetting momentarily all about his vaunted maleness. And like most women who find themselves in the wrong, his favorite tactic was an aggressive counterattack on some minute facet of the argument then under way—a complete shifting of the subject, for he must win at all costs. Like all small-minded men, he would never admit he was wrong.

We hurried up past the circular gravel driveway in the faint light from the street lamp behind us, and into the lighted vestibule. It was the same lovely spacious place, with the red-carpeted stairway running up to the left, the glittering iron-encased cluster of lights hanging down from the high ceiling, the elaborate coat-of-arms of the Comte and Comtesse de Lukler set into the mosaic floor. But the odor of must and mildew was overpowering; the air was chill and damp.

Here in this ancient house Prik had lived for fifteen years. The Luklers had long ago retired on their profits from making ice-cream to live in an even more sumptuous chateau in Switzerland, but he—their good friend—had stayed on here as a kind of unsalaried guardian of the place, having closed off the first and second floors, and retired to the third where he had a small bedroom and a living-room, and where there were—if I remembered correctly—two other huge bedrooms, one with red carpeting and figured cloth on the walls and bed, and the other one with blue. There was also a bathroom where Prik not only made his toilette, but used the washbowl as a sink. A small kitchen stove had been installed in one corner. It was a makeshift arrangement, but he had grown used to it. As for me, I always felt that there was something vaguely wrong either about washing oneself or the dishes in the same basin. But that was French for you, or Polish—or just ordinary European.

We climbed to the top of the stairs, puffing. Prik had grabbed the little lightweight case that I took on the plane with me, leaving me to lug the big heavy one to the top. He ran ahead, snapping lights on and off, illuminating our progress by pushing the 'minutières', those practical light switches invented by the frugal French to make sure that one did not waste electricity; they remained on for one minute and then went off. And he was busy unlocking doors as we went through, and re-locking them behind us.

It was no warmer in his living-room. There was a kind of indefinable tomb-coldness to the place; it seemed like a house out of a Poe story—the house of Usher, perhaps—and the dampness stank as must have the underground corridor—wet with dripping water and crusted with lime—down which Montresor led Fortunato towards the lure of the cask of Amontillado. The air was soaked with damp; you felt it in the wandering little currents of air our progress stirred up, and my hand—resting for a moment on one of the ancient velvet cushions of

the sofa—rose involuntarily at the sensation of cold and wetness, as though I had brushed against a night animal in a wet dark wood.

Prik snapped on the glaring overhead light and set my small bag on the floor. He looked at me critically.

«You are a lot older,» he said. It stung me.

«Neither of us is twenty any more,» I said.

That set him off. He started one of his orations, waving his hands. «But we can be!» he said excitedly. «We can think young and dress young and act young—and that makes us young!»

«It makes us look like vain old aunties,» I said, «and after all, it makes no difference any more. The young no longer do more than let their eyes pass over us. We never reach their consciousness; it's as if they looked at a post or door or a chair.»

«Not at all true,» Prik began.

I sighed. I did not feel like a discussion about being a thing of beauty and a boy forever just at that moment. «Later,» I said. «Prik, please, later. I'm terribly tired now.»

He paused and stared at me for a moment, and then his slackened jowls fell into the semblance of a grin. «Of course,» he said. «I forget.» He picked up a suitcase—the big one this time—and started towards the bedroom door. With his hand on the latch, he paused and spoke in English. «My nephew, he is in there. He is sleeping. Do not speak to him now. He has been crying. The other door is not unlocked yet. We must go through this way.»

I was startled. «Crying?» I said. «What for? How old is he?» For all of Prik's 'nephews' were always between eighteen and twenty-four, his topmost limit, and I had a picture of a tousle-haired child of eight holding a teddy-bear, or the French equivalent of one.

Prik shrugged. «Twenty-two. And he is crying because I scolded him.»

«Why?» I asked, intensely curious.

He shrugged again. The door was already open and he quieted me with a movement of his lips. We walked past the bed. A small night light was burning in the diagonal corner of the room. And in the rumpled covers of the red-upholstered bed, I had a brief and shadowed glimpse of the large frame of a young giant, silver-haired and blond as only Poles and Danes can be, strong and clean-necked, his face turned towards the wall. His right shoulder and arm and the white strap of his undershirt were above the cover. I unconsciously drew in my breath—the form of the shoulder was so muscular and strong, and the skin so white with ruddy undershadows—all 'milk and blood' as the Germans say—that it was like seeing a jewel in a hen's nest: utterly foreign to its environment, completely incongruous and out of place. The shoulder and head were classical; they belonged in sunlight on a piece of statuary, not in a bed in a faded room with crumbling draperies, in a dank and dismal house on a rainy November evening in Paris.

I paused, looking at the beauty of that fragment of his body, and then I saw Prik motion me onwards to the door to the blue room, which he was holding open.

The room was as spacious as the red one, but the color of it—blue carpet, blue-grey paper on the walls, a mirror with a black and ruined surface hanging at one side, and plaster scaling from every corner of the ceiling, the fragile spindly furniture, beautiful as it was—all these things made it seem colder than ever. I shivered. «I'm freezing,» I said.

Prik tossed that one off easily. «I'll make a fire tomorrow morning,» he said. «There is almost no coal to be had in Paris. We must be careful with what is left.»

I grimaced a little, since his back was turned. It was the same old Prik—

always the penny-pincher save when it came to spending money on something he wanted. I might as well make the best of it.

«Are you hungry?» he asked. «Have you had anything to eat? I don't have much—»

I made a gesture with my hand. His inflection told me what I was to say. «I don't want a thing, copain,» I said. «Had a big meal on the plane. Actually, Prik, I am so tired I think I'll go right to bed if you don't mind.»

Prik was obviously relieved. «I'll see you in the morning then,» he said, and carefully closed the door to the red room. I heard the lock click, and knew that I could not poach that night, but must use the other door and the extra toilet. Ah, well, there were twenty nights to go...

I undressed hastily, and steeling myself with a shudder, slipped my naked legs down into the cold damp sheets of the old blue bed. It soon warmed up, though the feeling of wetness remained. I lay looking at the ceiling, and the spell of the quiet house grew stronger on me. There was absolutely no sound anywhere; if there had been noise on the rue Erlanger, it would never have reached beyond those silent walls and the labyrinth of doors and passages that cut off all sound.

Once in my travels I stole a piece of the mosaic floor from the baths of Caracalla in Rome, and I am so made that by simply holding that stone in my hands and closing my eyes, I could become the floor from which it was taken. I could feel the young naked Roman feet slipping and sliding over my warm hot surface, and hear the tense and rapid Latin; sense the water from the baths flowing over me—feel the steam curling above me, and the hot juices of excited young men pouring into the mortar around me. So now, reaching up to touch the faded rough tapestry with which the bedframe was covered, and shutting my eyes, I felt the room peopled with the uncounted dozens of Prik's young men—naked, advancing, retreating, whispering, smiling, scowling, reaching out to touch me, bending to embrace me, or kneeling above my head—some stern, some pleading or begging, some commanding, all of them rampant and excited, hairy-legged or smooth, blond as sunlit gods, or dark with the tawny of Italian suns, the Arab boys with flashing eyes, the crew-cut American soldiers gleaming with ruddy health, the champion skiers with muscled thighs, the swimmers with arms gleaming as they cut the dark water...

The room was full of dreams, and all night the bed was warm and snug.

*

The next three days were somewhat hectic, until Prik could make up his mind to accept this invasion of privacy that I seemed to be for him. He nagged at me like a shrew, for everything under the sun. He objected to the way I shined my shoes—me, who had been in the Navy for six years and could apply a spit-shine along with the best of them! He scolded me for not scraping the butter off the roll with my knife, but cutting it instead, so that I got a small piece of foil with it and swallowed it—» A mortal poison!» he yelled. He gave me lessons three times over in how to lock and unlock the doors and gates, and cautioned me innumerable times about leaving the lights on. He insisted I wound the cuckoo clock wrong, complained that I smoked too much (a pack a day against his three litres of wine), bought Polish bread until I went out to get the French *baguettes* myself, and withheld an extra set of keys from me until I was on the point of moving to a hotel. In short, he acted like a crotchety old maid, seeming almost jealous of the house and its contents, which in a very real sense were not his, nor had ever been. Besides these annoyances, I saw also that the fountain of ideas in him had long since dried up, leaving only a crust of opinions. And his once open mind—like a fatally wounded oyster—slowly closed its shell so that it might perish undisturbed.

In those three days I never even met Erik, the 'nephew'. The boy got up at some ungodly hour, donned his worker's blues and his little faded blue cap, and went off at six in the morning. This uncivilized schedule put him back at the house a good three hours before Prik himself got home from his office, but on each of those days I was even later in returning, and each time Erik had already gone to bed.

The curiosity I felt over why he had been crying still burned strong within me. I kept at Prik about it until he said, with some annoyance,

«I was scolding him because he was acting like a woman.»

«In what way?» I asked, and then prodded him again. «I thought that was the way you treated him anyway, once you got him in bed.»

That really annoyed him. «Well, this time he was on his knees and had his arms around my legs, and was really acting like a dirty—» and he used an obscenity that was very misogynous.

«But why was he crying, in heaven's name?» I persisted. Prik looked uncomfortable and then tossed his head, so that he shook the raddles of loose flesh under his chin.

«Oh, he said that I was treating him like a whore, that I never helped him to enjoy himself while I was having him, that I ordered him around too much, that I kept him from meeting any girls because he doesn't speak much French, and lots of other things.» He moved his shoulders angrily.

«All true?» I asked. Prik changed the subject. «Bring me the lettuce,» he said. «What else do you want in the salad tonight?»

After that I decided that if I wanted anything done I would have to do it myself. Accordingly, I was in the house at four o'clock the next afternoon when Erik came home. I was lying on the bed in my dressing-gown reading, and I had with foresight left open the connecting door between my room and his. I heard the hollow echo of the slam of the great front door, and then the sound of him coming up the stairs, and finally I heard him turn the latch of this room and enter. That was my cue.

I got up and went to the door, book in hand. The room was fairly light, for the shutters were open. I had set myself to see a handsome young man, and I was not disappointed. His hair tumbled from the little blue worker's cap like a curling golden waterfall arrested in motion. His shoulders were broad, and stretched the pale denim of the worker's jacket tight to bursting across his wide chest. Through the close-fitting blue trousers I saw the muscular thighs at work as he took two steps into the room. And then he saw me and smiled, and walked towards me with his hand out. «I . . . am . . . Erik,» he said in French, somewhat haltingly. Then he said it again in English, and startled me.

I answered him in English. «I suppose you know who I am,» I said. He grasped my hand in his big one, twice as large as my own, with a broad strong back to it on which two prominent veins, I noted with some detachment, roughly formed a reversed letter 'R'. «I am surprised to hear you know English.»

He grinned even wider, with a dazzling effect of white teeth. «Do not, please, tell . . . to Prik. I learn . . . it from American girl. She is . . . daughter? of American colonel here . . . Paris.» He looked down, fiddling with his cap, and then threw it suddenly on a chair. «Perhaps . . . I get married,» he said, suddenly scowling. «Leave . . . all this,» and he gestured widely at the room. Then he looked at me in alarm. «Do not . . . tell?» he said.

«You can be sure I won't,» I said.

He smiled down at me. He was at least seven inches taller than I. I looked at the full red coloring of his lips, the high cheekbones, and the strong square Slavic jaw. I felt an unreasoning panic. This stalwart young man was hardly acting with what Prik described as the actions of a woman. Then suddenly he completely astounded me. We were standing fairly close; he took one step, and I felt his arm around my shoulder. With his free hand he tilted my chin up, and

kissed me full on the mouth. I felt a little flick of his tongue across my lips as he opened his mouth slightly, and then he released me and stood back, smiling. My heart was pounding.

«I . . . believe now . . . I *sure* you won't tell,» and he threw back his head and laughed. Then he said, his whole manner changing a little, subtly, «Now . . . you excuse? I must—» he gestured—»make the toilette—how you say? Wash . . . up?»

«Y-yes,» I stuttered. I pulled the cord on my dressing-gown tighter, and stumbled towards the door of my room. I looked back at him; he was already stepping out of his pale blue trousers, and I saw his golden thighs . . . and then panting, sweating, and half dizzy, I went into my room and shut the door behind me, leaning against it.

I had perhaps ten minutes to make up my mind. He was not drawing the bath water, but I heard splashing. All too vividly I imagined him giving himself a 'little French bath'—rubbing the washcloth over his magnificent arms and chest, raising his arms, scrubbing violently, and then his white torso—and first one foot, and then the other, raised high and put into the bowl. I walked around the room, sweating. I rubbed my chin, and even melodramatically pounded one fist into my open palm. And then I decided: to hell with Prik, and come what may.

I opened the door to Erik's room again. I closed the shutters and turned on the faint night light, far on the other side of the room. Then I pulled down the covers of his bed part way, threw my dressing-gown on top of his work-clothes, and crawled in. I was shivering, and not from the dampness this time, for I did not even notice it.

Three minutes later I heard him come into the room. He could not see me, for the head of the bed was high and I had moved into the darkest corner. But he must have immediately noticed the shutters closed, and the small light turned on. He walked naked across the room, easily, to his clothes, still not turning to look at the bed, and fumbled in his jacket pocket. My dressing-gown lay on top of it; he moved it aside. He took out a package of cigarettes and lighted one. And then still without turning, he said over his shoulder,

«You . . . want . . . cigarette?»

«L-later,» I said in a strangled voice. «I want . . . you.» The magnificent white body, poised with legs apart slightly, the hollows in his strong buttocks shadowed in the light, turned. He laughed and came to sit on the side of the bed. I reached up to touch the warm and soap-fragrant skin of his broad chest. Then he carefully crushed out the cigarette and leaned over me, staring intently out of clear eyes. Slowly his face descended, and I found myself drowning in the pools of blue.

There was no question in my mind that for the next two hours Erik got even with Prik for most of the woman-treatment that he had endured.

*

Suddenly the old bleak house became for me the most pleasant of places, as for the next week the new pattern of my life continued. The blue room seemed not half so cold and chill, and the red room—well, that was a warm and agreeable refuge against the rains of Paris, which beat violently across the shutters but could not extinguish nor cool the new heat in me. And each day, afterwards, Erik would rise and dress and disappear into the great mouth of Paris before Prik got home.

I could see Prik growing increasingly irritable, and was mildly amused. He complained once that Erik was always out, and that he had not come to Prik's room for a long time.

«He does not know anyone in Paris,» he fussed. «Where can he go? What can he be doing?»

«Probably just out having a drink at a nearby bar,» I said, «and playing the American pinball machines.»

And then I came home late one evening myself, to find Prik staring at an opened pneumatique which he held in his hand. He swore in Polish when I came in, and got up to open a table drawer. He was muttering all the time I was taking off my raincoat.

«What's the matter?» I said. I turned to watch him. He was gluing the flap of the special delivery letter back to the envelope. He faced me, and his expression of fury had drained him of all color. He threw the pneumatique down viciously.

«The dirty . . . pig!» he exploded.

«Who?» I asked innocently.

«A girl,» he said with hatred in his voice. «A dirty American tramp. Erik knows her, somehow. She wrote to ask him to come to see her tonight.»

«You opened the letter?» I said evenly.

«Of course!» he said angrily. «Why not? I bring that boy here from Poland, I treat him good and buy him food and clothes—and he goes off with a dirty—the rest was vile.

I kept silent. The truth was indeed different. Prik had made of the boy practically a slave, had guarded him jealously for himself, and refused him all the freedoms. I went to my room and went to bed—and it was only much later that I heard him and Erik in a violent argument. At the head of my bed was a speaking tube, leading to Prik's bedroom, through which the old Comtesse de Lukler had formerly summoned the maid from her quarters. The sound of the quarrel came clearly through the tube. Unfortunately, it was all in Polish and I could not understand a word of it. But the violence of it even rattled the metal of the tube. I finally closed the shutter over the open end in my room, but I could still hear the voices. And then there was a great slamming of doors, and I heard Erik undressing. Was I mistaken, or did I once catch a great dry sob from him? It was hardly the night to go to comfort him.

And it was almost impossible to live with Prik for the next two days. Again I thought seriously of moving out to a hotel, but that would mean not seeing Erik again, and we were really getting along very well. He told me of the argument, and how Prik had found out about the girl.

«Take it easy,» I said. «Just go ahead and marry her. You're not really one of us anyway; you're just a healthy sexual animal.»

Erik turned and smiled across the pillow at me. «You . . . understand well,» he said, and he reached over to grab my shoulder with his big hand, and dig his fingers in. «I like . . . you . . .»

I had not been so contented for a long time.

But things could not rest like that. Prik was sullen and silent for a while, and then one evening he had a visitor—a man in a belted black French version of a British trench-coat. I heard Prik go downstairs to let him in, and peeked at them as they came up the stairs. And then with only a little shame on my part, I opened the shutter of the speaking-tube. This time it was all in French.

I listened with growing alarm. The man was evidently a good friend of Prik's—they used the 'tu' form of speech with each other. I gathered that the visitor was a private detective associated with some agency.

«—but the girl will not know that,» Prik was saying. «You can give her a brief glimpse of your badge, she will not know the difference, and tell her you are from the police. And then be very polite—just ask her a few questions. Ask her how long she has known Erik Trycznski, if he ever mentioned having a police record, when he came from Poland, if he has ever spoken of any Communist affiliations, if he has ever tried to talk about American military plans

or get her to ask her father anything—you know how to do it. Do not make any—» there I missed a word or two—«but just frighten her. You understand?»

«Yes, I understand,» the man said.

«All right,» Prik's voice went on. «And here is something for your trouble. You will bring me a full report, yes? And you will go see her tomorrow? So, here is her name and address—Patricia Turner—you can read it? 28 Boulevard Victor-Hugo, Neuilly . . .»

Automatically, I don't know why, my hand sought a pencil and I too wrote down the name and address. Then I lay back thinking. It was really a very clever plan, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it. The phony policeman would visit Patricia Turner and question her; she would get frightened, for after all she had not known Erik long, and probably knew nothing of his background, or very little. She would feel her father might be compromised in whatever military position he held in Paris. There would be a letter written, and she would tell Erik she was going back to America or something like that. Perhaps she would even actually go. And I could not tell Erik, for Prik would immediately learn—and I did not want that open a break between him and me...

The letter arrived two days later. I saw the postman thrust it through the slot in the iron fence. It fell into the glass-backed letter box, and I went downstairs to check. It was addressed to Erik. I went back upstairs and dressed and left the house. I did not trust myself to be there when Erik got it. And so I had dinner alone that night in a quiet place on the Rue Helder, and got home late, nearly midnight. There was no sound from Prik's room, and I looked cautiously into Erik's. His bed was empty. I went to bed, saddened. That trap had been sprung, the gate had shut. Erik's chances for escape now seemed very remote indeed. The original pattern had been re-established, and behind Prik's closed door a young man had fallen back into the pit . . .

Ah, well, it was too bad—but it was really not my affair. I had one more day in Paris before going back to the states. There was a lot of last minute shopping to do. And it was at the perfume counter of the Galeries Lafayette that the idea burst upon me.

That evening I wrote a little letter. It was addressed to 'Mlle Patricia Turner' and sent to the Neuilly address in the suburbs. It said:

Dear Miss Turner,

The man you thought was a Paris policeman was only a private detective. He was hired by a homosexual who is in love with Erik. The purpose was to frighten you away from Erik, because the man who hired the detective is jealous of you. He feels that he may lose Erik to you.

Erik is a perfectly respectable young man. He is not a spy, a criminal, nor a Communist. And he is not a homosexual, unless you make him one by abandoning him.

Please do not tell Erik how you found this out. He would know at once who tried to help. I hope you will marry him and be very happy together.

I did not sign the letter. I mailed it at the Aerogare before I took the bus to Orly airport. I justified myself by remembering that I once was a Boy Scout, and we were always committed to do one good deed a day. I felt, as the letter dropped into the box, that this one might be valid for a whole year's requirements.

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