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CORRIDOR OF GENIUS

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GENIUS, by its very nature, does not tend to group together; its everyday existence of work and living is of necessity singular and removed. That it should settle within the narrow confines of a corridor with many of its kind seems highly improbable; indeed one might say socially abnormal. I doubt if there has ever existed in the history of Music, such a cluster of famous musicians as once gathered on the second floor of a New York hotel; gathered in a pattern so profuse so ornate so elaborate, that it cannot be aptly described by any other word than "rococo".

In the winter of 1922 I entered just such a fabulous corridor, where I walked lived listened and learned, and met either a genius a great talent or an arresting personality every four or five feet. One day a friend Muriel Draper had exclaimed: "My God! if you do go to the Wellington ~~to~~ live, knock at the door of three of the most gifted and lovable Poles in the whole world, and blame it on me! One is a great violinist, the second his brilliant sympathetic wife and the third a composer with a genius so fragile, so deeply wistful that you will be profoundly touched and will thank me forever!"

The next day, with my few bags and scores, I hurried into the lobby of the ^{Hotel} Wellington, on Seventh avenue only a few short steps away from the stage-door of Carnegie Hall. "Sorry we have only one room available" said the clerk, "and you're lucky since a musician just vacated it to go on tour. It's on the second floor, and quiet. Matter of fact, you'll find quite a few colleagues up there too", he confided. "Just what I want" said I, by now pregnant with destiny. I hastily climbed the short staircase behind the elevator, up to my new home...and adventure!

The following afternoon around four-thirty a stronge motor-impulse sent me out the door, despite an almost paralyzing conflict between excitement and timidity. It pushed me straight down the corridor to the door of a double suite on the left. In the middle panel was the

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bell. Without pausing I rang. Quickly the door was thrown open by a man whose face despite its ready affability, bore all the marks of the truly sensitive nature. We looked at each other a brief second, when suddenly things became easy. I began: "Monsieur Szymanowski?".. .."Oui Monsieur it is I"...."Muriel sent me"...."Ach! oui Monsieur, delighted....so very nice! Do come in please, and have tea with us!"

Such immediate warmth drew me into the vestibule and on into a little sitting-room, where I was presented to a lady seemingly in her late twenties, charming in a simple severe black dress. This was Madame Paul Kochanski. Her manner and gestures were fleet volatile but at the same time warm and spontaneous. She bade me sit down and talk and she had a flattering way of delicately firing many questions all at one time like swift friendly little darts. "She was so glad Muriel had sent me, would I have tea and how did I take it?"^{said she - in a voice eager} Tea, I thought, such an interruption ordering it from downstairs, the waiters prancing in, surely it would break the spell. But I saw that she had already gotten up and was standing at a table,^{in a corner by the sofa -} where she was preparing to make it herself. There was a Sterno stove with a small kettle, and there were glasses and saucers and boxes of little cakes, also a plate of dates. All one needed of course! I glanced around the room, furnished in the usual hotel style; not attractively but not shabbily either. Simply neutral, and as nothing could improve it, better to leave it alone! This they had scrupulously done. But near the window stood a Steinway upright piano looking bright and shining and eager to be used. I knew immediately it was the focal point of life in that suite.

We talked, explained, and began to love each other immediately. Both my hosts were lavish with kindly curiosity, and interest. All this, combined with such beautiful manners, such finished style of living, delighted me with its social lyricism. Graciousness was being played expertly-like Music, and with virtuosity and feeling. It all flowed legato and we were at ease; yet I could see what Muriel had meant...."so deeply wistful"....for there was a weary sensitivity in Karol Szymanowski, frangible almost to the point of helplessness, which he sadly tried to disguise....the better not to dismay his fel-

with hospitality.

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low creatures.

"Please come any day any hour, said Madame Kochanski, seeming to imply that there was nothing to do about life but love one's friends, see them often, and show them this love in unmistakable terms of interest and encouragement. "And if there is ever anything you should need, do please call upon us! That is what friends are for, is it not? We always have many callers, lots of musicians and you will hear what they are saying ^{playing} and doing".

Suddenly, and as if in emphasis, the door-bell gave a grating semi-circular ring, and somehow I knew that the procession had already begun! A torrent of sizzling Polish words in an audible combustion of personalities flared up in the vestibule where Madame Kochanski had hastened to admit her guest. Then....Artur Rubenstein exploded violently into the room. Everything in him was going at once, and I had the immediate impression of inexhaustible energy in a body of unlimited strength. From his forehead a shock of caracul-like hair travelled straight up into the air like tiny electric volts. "Ach! Artur, here is a new friend sent by Muriel....a young ⁿ pianist very gifted I know....we must hear him play". "Delighted to know him I am sure, ach! mes chers, I am overwhelmed by people engagements and work in this over-wrought city and I assure you as well that I am working up a first-class 'telephonophobia'...! So you know Antheil" (to me) "well he is really a most extraordinary chap; thought he'd left his gloves in my room this morning, he was showing me some new music of his, and can you imagine he has been 'phoning me every half-hour since, reminding me in a very peculiar tone of voice that he'd forgotten them. To such a point that I'm beginning to wonder if I didn't steal them so I keep looking....inside the piano, under the bed....in the water-closet, everywhere, trying to find ^{where I hid} them....if I did!" During all this comedy he darted around the room in such gay agitation and merriment that he was irresistible. We all died with laughter and I could see he greatly enjoyed playing upon our sense of humour as he would play upon his keyboard. Finding himself through perpetual motion within range of the

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piano he dropped violently onto the bench and leapt into the C minor Polonaise with its opening cortège-like dramatic passages. We listened, as violently....when suddenly he switched over into the brilliant running passages of "Chez-Petrouchka". It all seemed like a quick self-appraisal, like the testing of a motor; then, since all seemed to be running smoothly....abruptly he turned himself off. I knew he had just arrived from Paris, so I asked him what he thought of Jean Cocteau who was so popular there at that time. "Ach! tiens, I was ^{just} talking about him not long ago with Stravinsky who does not like him too well, but I said: "See here! Igor Fyodorovich, say what you like about Jean and his snobism, but admit that the moment he leaves any gathering where there is a discussion of ideas, he is immediately missed, the whole atmosphere losing much of its vitality and color. He had to admit that naturally!" I could see how anybody might have to admit almost anything under ~~the~~ Rubenstein pressure.

Again the crescent-like ring of the door-bell, calling my hostess into the vestibule. A tidal-wave of greetings in Russian surged into our ears, and in strode a blond lanky boyish-looking man with an oval head and mongoloid features contradicted by huge African-sculptured lips that seemed to be perpetually pouting. He bowed Russian-fashion in angles then sat down in a perfect square. All attention turned towards his commanding presence and eager questions were heaped upon him. He replied in a deep rich voice that had a metallic edge giving it a curiously imperative virile beauty. When he spoke he seemed always to be getting angry, but by the time he had reached the end of his sentences he was already laughing. They asked him what he had been composing. "Oh! nothing much" he replied, "but I've just about finished my Third Concerto and must admit that the finale is bedevilling me no end. Karol, I fear you'll have to finish it for me, though I warn you I'll NOT have it signed 'Szymanowski'!" "Delighted my dear Sergei Sergeyich, for I certainly can write better Prokofieff than Prokofieff any day; but calm your fears ~~however~~, for I warn you that I would never ruin 'Szymanowski' by signing it to Prokofieff-in any case!" Peals of affectionate laughter

glanced off this professional banter, and the air fairly tingled with playful rivalry and the well-tempered tension of this amiable tilt.

Just then a door opened from another corner of the room and a swarthy heavy-set little man wandered uncertainly into our midst. His eyes were swollen from what had undoubtedly been a noisy and difficult nap. I received a polite but grudging little nod when presented, and began to wonder if this not be the thorn on the side of the rosebush, for he had seemed bad-humored. Szymanowski, aside, caught my ear: "Don't pay the slightest attention; he's always like this before a concert.... tomorrow it's the New York Symphony, after which you'll see how lovable he is." "Paul is a great artist and a great man" said Madame Kochanski "these pre-concert nerves give one the wrong impression, for he is most kind and good-natured!" After watching him a few minutes I could see what she meant; for Kochanski was making a desperate effort to relax, at which after the first glass of tea he was fairly successful. Then good-naturedness and kindness started to flow and he began to tease us all, cracking jokes like a little boy.

Another grating signal from the bell, ardent greetings in the vestibule, and in swept a very generous figure of a woman with a face like an intellectual Gypsy. She pitched her tent squarely in the center of the room and ^{immediately} began to receive. They all surrounded her. "Ach! this is Nina Pavlovna" said Madame Kochanski, "she is so charming....a bit eccentric, composes music while in a trance and all that, but WHAT a beautiful voice, a boon to composers for she is eternally ready to present their ^{newest} works for them. It is said that she was the great love of Rachmaninoff's life and is known as the greatest interpreter of his lovely songs. Madame Koshetz, this is Mr. Tanner—a new friend forever....^{Since only an hour ago} can you imagine that?" "I most certainly can!" said Nina Pavlovna, the great voice taking on an immediately occult intonation, "for I'm sure I knew him in another life, as I did Rachmaninoff, so don't bother to tell me how gifted, charming....(here the inflection became almost "Mae-Westian") and GOOD-LOOKING he is!" We all looked a bit embarrassed, but we smiled while I managed to seem appropriately grateful. Madame was still far away, however—in that "other life". From which she hurried back all the

~~same~~ same, the moment she was asked to sing! And, when she had finished the lovely "Vocalise" of Rachmaninoff (which, it was said, was written for her but re-dedicated to Nyezhdanova after a spat!) with Prokofieff accompanying her lovingly, there were tears in the air, and we saw that she did know Rachmaninoff's music more poignantly perhaps than anyone in any life.

As she was finishing, Alfredo Casella came into the room. "Never could stand that 'Russian corn'", he ~~h~~ muttered in the Italian equivalent; "but what a beautiful voice and what a superb musician she is!" He was carrying a portfolio and he reminded me a little of Giorgio di Chirico whose paintings of desolate abstracted landscapes had already fascinated me. He took from his portfolio his "Pièces enfantines" fresh from the creative mold and was eager to play their first performance for his assembled colleagues. Everybody gathered round him at the piano, and after he had performed them carefully and expertly, all agreed that they were well turned out..."novel and interesting--Bravo!"

While he had been busy demonstrating these, another distinguished artist had added herself with quiet and simple dignity to the ever growing throng. She was then known and enjoyed great popularity as a pioneer of the new tendencies in Music. Avant-garde, of Canadian-French origin, she had a face like a Javanese dancer and looked as exotic. But there was a solidity in her as well. She eventually pioneered so far out that she came back bringing with her "Jazz" right into the concert-hall! It was Madame Eva Gauthier and she was saying to someone: "That ^uyoung chap George Gershwin....I have my eye on him. He's from 'Tin-pan alley' you know, but he's aiming at something higher and he's got the stuff, I assure you. I'm counting on his doing great things....you'll see!" We did see, and not long afterwards.

The ring at the door this time was long-and emphatic! Somehow, the semi-circular sound had now been drawn out into a full circle. A voice, like deepest woodwinds and passionate celli played a fanfare of greetings in royally exalted terms. Clouds of "Chypre de Coty" billowed forth ~~xxxx~~ ^{as} those that veil the planet Venus, and were as accessory to the ceremony

^{incense}
 as to one of that Goddess's rites. Through the door came a woman of enormous proportions... a ^{human} megalith, corpulent but youthful-looking with a large head and a face in three strong colors: black white and red.... the hair, the skin and the mouth. The countenance, unmistakably Hispanic, was a beautiful one with an expression of mournful grandeur. The mouth, fastidious and sensual, clung with its lips to long handsome teeth like those of some thalassic mammal polished to their brilliant whiteness by its briny habitat. The eyebrows unusually long and expressive, when not rampant in a pattern like Chinese dragons, were used to dramatize her personality and speech as she drew them up into an expression like that of the Mater Dolorosa. She wore a black dress of flowing lines that gave her the look of a penitent. The eyes, even the eyeballs themselves were of an unusual opulence and there was a strange cast in one of them that gave the impression they were seeing beyond what they were actually looking at. She alternated in manner between real dignity and a kind of melodramatic pomposity. And she had a sly naughtiness which made her seem like one of those worldly abbesses of other times as depicted perhaps by the pen of a Boccaccio. She commanded the entire room instantly and addressed her audience with volleys of superlatives, using words as if she were pronouncing them in italics. Metaphor and simile were aggrandized to monumental proportions and her use of hyperbole was outrageously funny. Everybody deferred delightedly to her and howled at her hilarious remarks. She had a way of cocking her head with narrowed eyes, raising the Chinese dragon eyebrows higher still, the better to study her effect upon the auditors. She was truly an exhibitionist in the grand manner! This was Marguerite d'Alvarez, the great British-Peruvian contralto, celebrated for her sensually subtle interpretations of Debussy and ^{for} her flaming delivery of her ancestral Spanish music. Legend had it that while still a novice in the operatic world she had not been averse to the deployment of her wiles to bedazzle the chronically amorous old Leopold King of the Belgians, and that when added by Oscar Hammerstein to his flock of siren prima donnas in Manhattan Opera days, Mary Garden always sent them both invitations to tea on one card. "Artur, mon cher" she cooed, "jouez-nous du Debussy.... just look at him.. .. such a great artist, such a ^{real} man!" and, in an aside to us, "not so attractive physically perhaps, but so mentally seductive that I'd dearly

love, were it possible, to ~~just~~ ^{just} skip the body and have a mad ^{love} affair with ~~such~~ ^{the} brain! Which reminds me" she continued, in a voice full of strip-tease, "of that darling ephebe I once loved so insanely" (pronouncing that word of Greek origin—to which the French have lent a spicy ambiguity—as if she were rapturously savoring a combination of Baklava, Halvah, Figs and dates smothered in whipped cream) "whose soul was like a flower a Narcissus I used to say". Here she paused as if, having spoken a simile and made a classification possible only to a Shakespeare she was permitting our coarser minds to grapple with it. . . . then continuing, she went on melodramatically: "Ah! mes chers, that adorable and adored Adrian! So fragile that I always felt he was made of spun glass, and I ADORED that youth so madly, vous savez, to such a pitch, that I followed him around like a timid amorous little gazelle" (here, we could hardly restrain ourselves before the absurdity of such quantitative discrepancy!) "and would pray to Venus nightly that she concoct divine perfumes ^{for me -} like perhaps 'La Transpiration de Thaïs' or 'L'Haleine de Dionysius' so that I could lay them at his divine little feet. And can you imagine" she added in a tone of pained sensuality. . . . "his frail exquisite little body—('of spun glass', she reminded our dull memories)—"was like a Saint carved in ivory" ('not spun glass then' WE reminded ~~#####~~ our dull memories) "no! not ivory. . . . but alabaster—and do you know, that angel was so deliciously thin" she added with sensuous rapture, "so thin that while lying there upon our couch of ecstasy, I could say my 'Hail Marys' upon the beads of his divine little backbone!" This last she had intoned as if kneeling at her prie-dieu, and since it was really a bit too intimate, an almost puritanical silence fell over the whole room. But, recovering ourselves quickly we saw that this woman's disk at the table of life was an incorrigibly lush "volupté"—so we all laughed, a bit self-consciously one might add. ^{But} ~~then~~ then, as if to relieve us of the burden of our embarrassment which she had somehow discerned, she countered frivolously: "Vous savez, I lunched at Alda's yesterday, and there was one of those female pests who always tell you the truth, especially about yourself! She had been placed at my right. . . . I can't imagine why Alda so honored her but" (and in a tone of infinite condescension) "I finally addressed her and asked her how she thought my Debussy compared with that of Mary Garden.

Just to humor her and to be polite naturally, since 'la noblesse oblige' she added, in a lower and rather confidential tone, "but can you IMAGINE her impertinence when she replied" (here d'Alvarez screwed up her mouth to mimic the gawky nasal ~~Xxxxx~~ accent of the bore) "My dear d'Alvarez, do you want me to tell you the truth?!""and I replied: "NOT ON YOUR LIFE!! How presumptuous of you anyway...for when I DIEGOD will tell me the truth! She almost choked on the oyster she was about to devour, and I fully expected her to have a stroke!" We all laughed uproariously at this, for she had really performed ^{it} like a great clown. x

This time the ring at the door was short and staccato. It was grand old Siloti, one of the most distinguished pupils of Liszt and the teacher of Rachmaninoff who was his cousin. Upon entering the room he was immediately so popular and looked so venerable that d'Alvarez had to give up the floor to him. He had the look of having been born of the spiritual body of Liszt and was apparently heir to much of its ardor. For, although he appeared paternal and towering he flirted openly with the ladies. With him was the British conductor Albert Coates, the famous interpreter of Scriabin and his wife who said they had just met Myra Hess in the lift lately arrived for her American debut and that she too would join us all in a few minutes.

An enchanted but crowded forest I thought, and prepared to take my leave. Karol helped me on with my coat and said: "Au revoir cher ami! and please come again soon; that shouldn't be difficult since you live only ten feet away, should it?" "Were I ten miles away" I said, "it would not only be imperative but irresistible!" So I paid my compliments to the hostess, who was already at the door admitting more guests. And as Szymanowski's last remark sounded agreeably in my left ear, the right caught the sonorous noble passages for strings divisi of his Second Symphony, which Rubenstein was playing and praising with professional admiration and Polish pride all the while proclaiming their beauty to the assemblage. And as the door closed softly, I took my leave to the accompaniment of those exalted ^{angelic} themes.

I walked briskly down the corridor uplifted and grateful...if some-

what perplexed. I simply could not cope with any more of them at the moment, but I also knew that from then on I could not give them up for long. I thought I had rid myself of them temporarily and was beginning to feel a release. But hardly had I reached this conclusion when, turning a corner I bumped squarely into Fritz Kreisler and Richard Strauss striding along, talking animatedly in German. And Strauss, explosively irritated about something, was endeavoring to enlist Kreisler's sympathy. But the dark sad eyes of the greatest violinist of many generations were at that moment shining with tolerant amusement. I hastened down into the haven of the lobby. I had to have some kind of respite. The manager asked me how I liked it up there, if I was comfortable? Thanking him I said: "Yes, but don't you think the gathering of so many....fantastic people up there at the Kochanskis' is rather unusual? I've never seen anything like it!" "Unusual my dear sir, what's so unusual about it, they all LIVE up there clear up and down the corridor. They're interesting people, but sometimes they do give us quite a headache! Like the time that ~~XXXXX~~ pianist with the phony Polish name packed them in by the thousands for her recital in Carnegie Hall. Then had an attack of stage-fright and left them all sitting there till nine o'clock. Finally someone in the audience, a pianist of course, got wise, and yelled they'd all been taken for a ride. That put the whole Hall in such an uproar that her poor manager came running over here in a state of collapse. Suddenly, just as we were about to call out the squad car, and were searching the hotel from pillar to post some music student came bursting in shouting: "Hey! ^{there} if you're looking for that looney pianist she's sitting across the street in the drugstore, been there since half-past seven they say, eating ice-cream sodas all flavors...can you beat it?" "It was terrible and quite pitiful too" continued the manager, "she'd had one of those 'mental breakdowns' I believe they call them and something in her had snapped. Tell the truth I'd say she was an exception, for from what I've seen of them they're mostly well-balanced people. Moreso even than the average I'd say also. After all they've spent most of their lives training ^{like} ~~with~~ the discipline of acrobats, haven't they?"

His tale ^{had} appalled me, but reassured by this last declaration, I slowly climbed the ~~steps~~ back to my room, still unaware that my path was to be

further strewn with these "Chosen of Heaven!" But I was ^bdumfounded by a sudden opening and closing of doors! Musicians were scurrying about in total unawareness of one another and I began to wonder apprehensively if reality were not perhaps unreal and whether I was not actually a protagonist in some strange film-fantasy! But no! out of the doors came definitely familiar faces. Elly Ney and her husband Willem van Hoogstraeten the conductor both hurrying across to Carnegie Hall, he to conduct, she to solo in a Mozart concerto, with the Philharmonic. Out of another door rushed Myra Hess bumping into them as they adroitly avoided colliding with her. "Hello there! Wish me well, I'm off to Aeolian Hall, my New York début tonight you know. You'll come to my next I hope in Carnegie Hall, won't you?!" "Are you nervous, Miss Hess?" I said, by now almost clinically suspicious after the manager's harrowing tale. "Well rather, I dare say, but I really think I enjoy it, if you know what I mean?" I did know what she mean't but after the "Polish" pianist I found it a bit paradoxical. "Cheerio then, tomorrow I'll be feeling like the morning after the night before, but do come and have tea anyway and we'll chat....that is if I can still talk!" Humour fairly frolicked down the corridor with her as she rushed down to her waiting taxi. "Tea, I thought aloud, "I wonder how she does it....will she too have a little Sterno stove?" In any case I knew she would be fully equal to the occasion. "Good Luck!" I called after her. "I know you'll play beautifully and have great success!" Those were not idle words.

I sauntered back towards the Kochanski suite. Miss Hess had given me a new slant on the dwellers of Parnassus. I listened under the partially open transom, but the one directly opposite would have none of it! For Kreisler, with that opulent shining tone of many hues in a mechanism of strong and graceful precision....two superlatives in one supremacy, Orpheus in the Wellington, was reviewing the Beethoven concerto. I froze and listened with all my perceptive being. For several minutes I was permitted this state of luxurious rapture, since he was going over and over some of the most beautiful passages as if saying to himself: "See how it can be done even more beautifully this way this time". But suddenly, to my dismay....it stopped! I waited. It did not resume. Some small miserable

detail of living had stopped Beethoven and Kreisler dead in their tracks!

I walked slowly back to my room, lost in reflection. Through Prokofiev's door came the insistent repetitious rhythms of that "damnable" finale! He was beating it out laboriously trying it this way that way, a struggle he had not yet won, and Karol the rascal had left him in the lurch! He'll get it....all at once, I mused, and walked on. Over the transom of Siloti's suite came soaring the romantic songfulness of the "Wanderer Fantasy" of Schubert. Bet that composer didn't have trouble getting that down on paper I thought, as I bent both ears into focus. He had come to that lovely C#minor section which so evokes the sad silence of dark green valleys....when suddenly I had the sensation of a strong force pulling me out of myself! Was it "The Wanderer"....all wanderers perhaps? I began to feel a kind of freezing terror. Would they do this to me in the dead of night as well....invading my sleep, transporting me to some semi-conscious realm from which there would be no return? I turned the knob of my door with a shudder; but into the room with me like an unwanted guest came the high hornlike tenor of Vladimir Rosing wailing the "Idiot's Song" of Moussorgsky! I threw open the window thinking to shoo it out, like a dragon-fly, beautiful perhaps but too uncomfortable. From the window opposite across the little court like long sinuous ribbons of emotion writhing in the air, came the ardent phrases of the Tchaikowsky concerto. It was late....but young Jascha Heifetz had still to polish it up....eternally....eternally!

I fell wearily onto my bed, closed my eyes, told God I'd had enough and to please stop them! In a few seconds Sleep came gently into the room. She placed a tender hand upon my heart another firmly upon my forehead....merciful electrodes of understanding and release. Slowly she raised me up and led me softly out ## the door. We glided down the corridor towards the elevator. She rang. It came. We stepped in. "Floor please!" said the Operator. "Upwards!" commanded Sleep. He tried to start the car. It would not go....he could not close the door....we were stuck and could not leave the Corridor of Genius!!! "Hurry!" cried Sleep. "You'd better get back to your room!" "I think so too" I said in a really terrified voice. "But please do not leave me till Dawn comes!" "Hush! I shan't, here we are but hurry and lie down quickly, here! this will make you drowsy again! She flung open

the transom, and the limpid enthralling tones of Nina Koshetz, like drops of ~~of~~ ethereal p^lalliatives, fell upon those places in the mind where Sleep begins her nightly hypnosis....and the "Berceuse" from "Sadko" slowly erased me...ⁱⁿto a blessed nothingness....