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# CAFÉ SELECT

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# CAFÉ SELECT

# 1

Searching for a suitable spot for a Dubonnet I emerged into Place Dauphine. Through the trees I could glimpse a café. It had something unusual about it. Not that there was anything remarkable in the name "Café Select" which was to be read above its door, for *Select* is a common name for a café in France. What did seem remarkable was the little crowd of some twenty or so people gathered outside the entrance. They were all men and all carried either a bag in their hands or an attaché-case under their arms. They could scarcely be clients in the usual sense. In the doorway I could see a middle-aged man, presumably the proprietor, in braces and collarless shirt open at the neck, apparently in the process of ejecting visitors from his café, an action which seemed to be causing general disappointment.

"Monsieur Durand, you promised you would see people today!"

"May I come back in the morning, Monsieur Durand?"

"Monsieur Durand, you must admit though, that my offer –"

The man in his shirt-sleeves gathered himself for a last effort and with considerable difficulty ejected the three or four who had been preventing him from shutting the door. Then the door slammed to and a little piece of board with the legend *Fermé* appeared on the inside of the glass. The unwelcome ones departed in various directions and within a few minutes the *place* was empty.

Such a scene inevitably aroused my curiosity, for it is not every day, at least in Paris, that you may see a café proprietor chucking out visitors. If they had been creditors, the thing would

have appeared more comprehensible, but judging by what I had seen and heard it was the proprietor who had been in the dominant position.

Crossing to the side on which the café lay I walked along the pavement in order to pass the entrance as though by chance. Suddenly the door opened and out peered *le patron*, presumably to see if the coast were clear.

"Vultures!" the man muttered in a tone of deep disdain.

I was then only a few feet from him. He turned his head and I found myself gazing into a thin, puckered and very irritated face which, nonetheless, was not without dignity. His grey hair, now slightly disordered, was well kept. The man was not the usual run of café proprietor. Perhaps he had previously owned a smart restaurant and financial difficulties had compelled him to descend to a café. There was an air of "having seen better days" about him – he had that sort of face.

As our eyes met his expression underwent a surprising transformation. His mouth widened into a broad smile and a glint of satisfaction came into his eyes.

"Is it not Monsieur –?"

And he said my name.

I looked at him again, this time with that nervous intentness you always affect when faced with someone whom it is evident you ought to know. Feverishly I searched through the jumble of my memories. Thank God, there it was: Durand, late private waiter, the sort that you engage for special occasions through an employment agency.

Whatever the smiling man in front of me might lack it was certainly not dignity. Our acquaintance dated from a few years previously when my wife and I had invited some visiting fellow-countrymen to dinner. On the very morning of the dinner our maid had announced that she had been attacked by *la grippe* and felt quite incapable of waiting at table. With a promise of help

she let herself be persuaded to retain command of the kitchen. An employment agency with which we got in touch was very glad to send us a first-class waiter whose name was Durand.

"Monsieur Durand is a man who knows his profession inside out," the manageress assured us.

That seemed to have solved our problem. How were we to know that Durand was altogether too first-class; that on countless occasions he had assisted at luxurious dinners where a butler calls out the name and title of each guest in a loud voice as they come in through the door; that he had even acted as wine waiter in the Élysée Palace where tradition requires that the name and year of the wine shall be whispered into each guest's ear as his glass is filled. Our ignorance of this illustrious background was complete, yet we felt a vague suspicion of the truth as soon as Durand arrived. There in the door stood a distinguished-looking gentleman smiling the engaging and at the same time slightly contemptuous smile of an ambassador. We bowed politely to each other. You automatically bow to a man of Durand's type. The impressive figure placed a little case on the settle in the hall and from it produced a dazzling white jacket and a pair of equally immaculate white gloves. He rearranged a wisp of hair that had taken the wrong direction and politely asked for his instructions. I initiated him into the food and drink we had prepared for our guests, explaining that it was meant to be a slight affair with a Swedish character and improvised rather than formal. We were to drink a schnaps before the one and only wine. At his request I translated the label on the bottle of Swedish schnaps.

The first of our six guests to ring at the door was a pleasant and inexperienced youth who had only just started at the university. We heard a mysterious muttering going on in the hall, then the drawing-room door was opened and as the youth crossed the threshold a stentorian voice was heard announcing: "Monsieur le candidat Petterson!"

The same procedure was employed for the other guests, all of whom were equally taken by surprise. Nonetheless conversation soon became general, and then it was time to eat. We took our places in the dining-room. Durand's white-gloved hand poured out the schnaps and at the same time he leant forward and whispered into six astounded ears, "*Eau de vie de colonel.*" It was worse when the wine came. It is an unfortunate fact that most Swedes can hardly be called connoisseurs of wine, and with that fact in mind, and the hope that nobody would notice anything, I had bought a very ordinary wine. I am ashamed to admit that it was, in fact, a nameless Bordeaux of most recent vintage and bottled in Paris. Durand handled the bottle as though it had been bottled in 1934 at Chateau la Tour itself, held it in the tips of his fingers and let the contents flow slowly into the glasses. It flowed so slowly and the effect was so impressive that conversation stopped. Our eyes were riveted on Durand's masterly white-gloved hand, and every time a glass was filled we heard his theatrical whisper:

"*Bordeaux Ordinaire 1950.*"

That was a dinner which I prefer to forget, not least because it transpired that one of our guests had a knowledge of wine that was as good as it was unexpected.

"I admire that," said he, "it says a lot for the honesty of one's host when he has the courage to give his waiter such instructions."

"If you have the cheek to offer your guests a 1950 Bordeaux, frankness is the least you owe them," I answered.

It wasn't a very clever reply and I thought I could observe a certain irony in his polite smile. But there was no irony in Durand's sauve expression. There was no question of it being a practical joke. The man's professional perfection was such that his ceremonial elegance had become purely mechanical. No doubt he was dreaming of his Café Select at the same time as he waited

on us at table, and as for the wine, that to him was obviously just the whim of an eccentric foreigner.

We bowed to each other when he left.

Some months later I happened to run into him in a shop in the Boulevard St. Germain. His dress was faultless, but without his white jacket and white gloves he was not nearly so impressive. It was a transformation such as many officers undergo when they get into mufti. We chatted a little; he told me that he had stopped going out as a waiter. The profession of a waiter, he said, had its advantages, but not once you'd got into your fifties. It was a profession that you must give up in good time.

"I'm considering getting a place of my own. Over the years I have been able to scrape a few pennies together, and my wife received an unexpected little legacy a short while ago. It's just a question of getting hold of something really suitable."

I thought I could see this "something really suitable" with my mind's eye: a little luxury restaurant with red carpet on the floor, ornate mirrors on the walls, and wall sofas behind elegantly laid tables. Durand would walk about in a morning coat doing the honours, and most of his patrons would belong to the Paris that is talked about. In one corner you would see an elderly man with the ribbon of the Legion of Honour in his buttonhole screw a monocle into his right eye as he gripped the menu. It had to be the right eye because the left would have closed, it being a French tradition that every real *viveur* sooner or later suffers a sort of stroke which puts the left eye out of action. Durand would give his orders to his subordinates in a low, firm voice. For a couple of particularly important guests he would personally prepare a *perdreau flambé* on a silver-plated chafing dish. When the couple had reached the coffee stage (she would be ablaze with jewels and he, like most *industriels*, a man of insignificant appearance) Durand would clap his hands discreetly. In would be brought a bottle of Augier Frères 1893, and the expert hand of Durand

would pour some of its contents into the two huge goblets. Then would come the bill, discreetly and as though by chance. The big business man would lift the folded half just sufficiently to allow a casual glance at the total. No more. A large note would be borne out on the plate, and there would be no question of change. And Durand would follow them to the revolving door. "*Au revoir, Madame, au revoir, Monsieur.*"

Durand had made his purchase and was preparing to go.

"It is a little café I'm looking for, something that we could manage without help. It is not out of the question that we may do a little food as well. My wife is good in the kitchen. Of course it will be simple, but perhaps I may presume to inform you at the beginning. *Au revoir, Monsieur.*"

He disappeared through the door.

The perfect Durand who could handle a wine bottle with the same elegance as a famous violinist his bow was not aiming at any luxury restaurant. Not even at a chic little bar in one of the good quarters. What he was aiming at, was a *bistro* which could be combined with serving a few meals. For many long years he had seen rich surroundings at close quarters, and that, if nothing else, should have excited dreams. But Durand had dreamt of a *bistro*. He had scraped and saved and put by franc upon franc in order to realize his dream. His aim was at the realistic height which has made the French one of the most *petit bourgeois* of all nations. The average Frenchman does not dream of greatness, he only dreams of what is perfectly possible of being realized: a *little* house in the country, a *little* fortune. That may seem rather mean and earthbound. So it is. But at the same time it is that attitude to life which provides the firm ground beneath the nation's feet. Perhaps, too, it explains why France always seems to recover so much more quickly than other countries from the ravages of war, and why people there live so well despite the country's political superstructure being so badly fashioned. But

what about flashing, scintillating French culture? How can that sort of life germinate in such a soil? Luckily for the French the old proverb that the exception proves the rule is more than ever true in their country. France is inhabited by forty million *petit bourgeois*, but that does not prevent a Haussmann from being able to get a scheme for replanning Paris carried through, or an *alpiniste* from suddenly taking it into his head to climb Annapurna – and doing it. Nor does it prevent one or two Frenchmen from designing more beautiful clothes than anybody else, or the name of an author with a daring philosophy from becoming a household word throughout the civilized world. The *petit bourgeois* climate does not seem to be a stifling one. In a film which was very popular some years ago the following malicious question was asked of another people in which that atmosphere is especially prevalent: what actually have the Swiss achieved in the world? The answer was: the cuckoo clock. You can't possibly say that sort of thing about France. Millions and millions of Durands see to it that the nation continues to live and function, for all its outward chaos. But the presence of a few highly active exceptions provides the reason why the foreigner does not automatically raise his hat and then think of something else when he hears the name of France.

So there we stood shaking hands on the Place Dauphine. Durand was in the mood to show off his café, and he was also obviously pleased that he had prevented me from walking past. It is said within the café world that it is a sign of good luck if an acquaintance should appear, unexpected and uninvited, on the same day that you open a new establishment, and that was the Café Select's opening day. It had been open since that morning, but so far there had been no *clients*.

"Anyway, who could have squeezed through the door?" said Durand. "You saw the crowd, I expect. How can you get

customers inside when the place is filled with people who want to sell instead of buying?"

"Didn't you say something about 'vultures'?"

"It isn't easy for the beginner."

It transpired that the "vultures" were the salesmen of the wine and aperitif firms. He called them that because they appear as suddenly and unexpectedly as the vultures in the Far East. He had read how those revolting birds come flying by the hundred within a minute of a cow or an ox dying. Perhaps no vultures have been seen thereabouts all day. There has been no smell to guide them, yet nevertheless, there they are, hungry and unpleasant. It was very much the same with the wine and aperitif salesmen. It was, said Durand, incomprehensible how quickly the news of a café having been bought spread among them. He himself had gone straight from signing the contract to Place Dauphine to take another look at his new acquisition, and there was an aperitif man sitting on the step waiting for him with a welcoming smile. The very next day they had been there in force. They had swarmed about Café Select like flies round a piece of meat. The various firms seemed to have representatives and informants everywhere. When a prospective café owner reports his intention of starting a café at the *Préfecture* and produces the necessary documents to show that he is not a thief, murderer or otherwise a criminal, their secret signalling system starts work. When he writes his name in the *Registre Commercial* or signs the contract in the office of *le notaire*, at once a number of persons rush to the nearest *bistro* to telephone the news to their masters. When he joins the restaurant- and café-owners' Association, which has the practical and easily memorable name of "*Union et Chambre Syndicale des Débitants de Vins, Restaurateurs, Artisans-cuisiniers, Restaurateurs et Hôteliers de Paris et sa Banlieu*", the secret service of the aperitif firms know of it at once. And there is no means of defence. You cannot just show them the door.

The man who opens a pub in England has mainly his beer and the ingredients for a small number of more or less standard drinks to think about. In France a huge selection is expected of even the simplest *bistro*. Aperitif drinking is a sort of right of citizenship. If you want to give a really shattering picture of French misery you should never omit to add: "He cannot even afford his aperitif before dinner, *pauvre diable*." That sort of thing can move a French stone to tears.

"I can, of course, get rid of a number of the salesmen," said Durand, "but I must be able to serve Dubonnet, St. Raphael, Cinzano and Pernod. Yes, Byrrh, Quinquina, Noilly-Prat, Martini and Banyuls can't be done without either. And of course somebody might easily ask for Kina-Rok. Then, naturally, you must have a decent selection of red and white wines, which, taking it all in all, are the normal aperitif. And all the different sorts of waters that people think they ought to drink for their livers: Perrier, Vichy, Vatel, Evian... and did I say anything about Cognac and liqueurs? There you must have a good selection. One asks for Martel, another wants Hennessey, a third insists on Courvoissier. And of course, a decent stock of champagne, the law courts being only just round the corner; for those who have had the luck to be let off usually celebrate in the cafés hereabouts..."

It looked as though he were never going to stop. I tried to bring him on to another track.

"Isn't it a little rash to begin just this sort of thing? Isn't the competition..."

Durand had given that side of the question very thorough investigation. The *Union et Chambre Syndicale* had provided him with figures which to me appeared fantastic. In all France there are 180,000 cafés and 140,000 restaurants. In greater Paris (the same as the Seine Department) there are 28,000 cafés and restaurants competing with each other. A friend of Durand's with a bent for mathematics had worked out what this amounted to in "counter

kilometres" and had come to the conclusion that Parisians have between fifty and sixty kilometres of bar and counter at their disposal. If the counters were all put together and one end fastened to the Eiffel Tower it should be possible to slide all the way down to Fontainebleau. Yet Durand considered the market by no means saturated.

"I thought there were considerably more; in fact I felt quite encouraged when I saw the actual figures."

"How can they all manage?"

"Mon Dieu! People must have somewhere to go. Besides, most of the cafés are family undertakings like mine, husband and wife run it and a daughter or a son perhaps also give a hand, and then most have some poor relative they have to look after. There's no money going out on wages in that sense."

"And the customers?"

"That is a stone that has to be started rolling. To begin with, it's far from easy. You ask your friends and acquaintances to remember the new place and to recommend it to other people. You have cards printed, and these are left here and there. You have the aperitif salesmen, some of them will undertake to provide a certain number of clients for an order of a certain size. That's part of their way of doing business, and then you just have to wait and not lose patience. Twenty-eight thousand competitors is nothing to lose sleep over. Then as well you have your tobacco licence, and that brings a number of people quite automatically. It's an excellent draw."

Durand had succeeded in obtaining a tobacco licence. The glass advertisement cigar of the tobacco monopoly, which always marks a place where tobaccos can be bought and which in the evenings shines like a red light to tempt the nicotine addict, was to be put up in a few days' time. Similarly the board proclaiming "*tabac*". Otherwise everything was ready. Through the door I could see the traditional glass "cage" with its shelves already

laden with packets of match-boxes, cigarette lighters, pipes, holders, cough lozenges, books of tickets for the Lotterie Nationale, boxes with telephone discs and bundles of *papier timbre*, a stamped paper on which an ingenious government requires that certain documents be made out, and from the sale of which it receives a nice extra income. And also, of course, packets of cigarettes and boxes of cigars monumentally arranged in decorative colourful piles. There were stacks of popular *Gitanes* and *Gauloises* which will give the industrious smoker the same hoarse voice that the murderer assumes in a Grand Guignol play to deliver his last harangue to his victims. *Gitane*, however, has the advantage that it always stays put behind the ear, unless the ear sticks out abnormally. That is an important factor. I know one Frenchman who, when he first saw his infant son and realized that his ears protruded far more than was usual, exclaimed in a voice of anguish: "But where can he keep his cigarettes, *le pauvre malheureux*!" For people with their ears at a normal angle *Gitane* is a thoroughly reliable cigarette; its thickness and the roughness of the paper help to keep it in place.

Beside the cigarette packets was a pile of Whiffs and cigars. The whiff *Nina*: an eccentrically crooked and curved stick of a tobacco-like substance. Sometimes it has the peculiar quality of imitating the smoker's feelings by emitting a wailing sound while burning. Among the cigars was *Letitia* which no smoker has yet succeeded in getting to draw, even though he may have passed a wire from one end to the other before lighting it. *Diplomat*, as the name implies, is another cigar of the reserved type which will not flame up at the first pull. On the other hand there is nothing to be said against the drawing quality of *Voltigeur*: in fact it burns with the fierceness of a wood fire. Its tobacco, however, appears to have been grown in the kitchen garden of the country seat of the *chef* of the Monopoly, and its aroma can force the most faithful of dogs to abandon his master. Durand was also ready to

serve you from a wealth of pipe tobaccos arranged in a pyramid of tins. Pipe smoking has become quite common since the second world war. The French who spent it in England are the chief offenders. The tobacco appears to be mostly of the inferior, very variable qualities. The cheaper brands have no name, but are referred to according to the colour of the packet, red, green, blue, etc. One of these brands is said to be so strong that it burns with a rumble like thunder, often emits sparks and has been known to burst the bowl of a pipe. Taking it all in all the Monopoly does well by the smoker. Its products of course are not for weaklings. French tobacco is a man's tobacco, and you don't complain. On the contrary, most Frenchmen appear very puzzled should a foreigner pass remarks about the quality of French tobacco.

Everything a smoker could be imagined to require seemed to be provided in Durand's well-stocked showcase. Yet there was something lacking: a plump little woman with bright eyes and quick tongue to sell cigarettes, stamps and chewing gum with a pleasant smile and an apt retort.

"Have you anyone to see to the selling?"

"So far I have had such good luck with this café that it is almost becoming frightening. Just imagine! The other day we got a letter from our daughter who is married and lives in Nantes, and she is going to get divorced! In a few weeks she will be here and will take over the tobacco side.

"Perhaps my delight at the divorce appears a little strange to you," he added, "but the girl is our only child. Obviously we had our plans and ideas concerning the marriage she should make. Above all, our desire was that she should not marry beneath her . . . if I may say so, she comes from what, according to our circumstances, is quite a good family. For a time she was going out with an industrious and promising young man who worked in the ironmongery department in Printemps. Unfortunately

nothing came of it. Instead she married a . . . civil servant. You understand, of course . . ."

I understood. Being a true Frenchman Durand fought the power of the State wherever and whenever he encountered it. For him the State was no civic community in which he had part and a responsibility, but a foreign occupying power which plundered the poor conquered populace and stripped people to the bone. No good French patriot would willingly ally himself with the representatives of that occupying power, *les fonctionnaires*. Durand belonged to the permanent *résistance*. He regarded the word *fonctionnaire* as invective far stronger and more insulting than either *salaud* or *cochon*. There were, of course, civil servants and civil servants. First of all there was the great mass of those employed in the State factories and institutions to whom he reacted more or less in the same way as the Parisians did to the German soldiers in the streets of Paris during the second world war: cold, aloof, but without being aggressive. But then there was the undergrowth, the Gestapo creatures, the shiny gentry with their well-thumbed files and brief-cases whose task it was to collect taxes and pry into people's private circumstances, *le fisc*.

He looked at me with eyes that implored my understanding, in a way that was almost pathetic.

"It is best that I tell the truth," he said quickly and lowered his gaze. "I would ask you to be kind enough to regard it as confidential. She married a tax-collector."

It seemed like the overture to a friendship. It was obvious that to have made that confidence must have cost him almost as much as if he had had to reveal that his daughter had run off with a gangster or got herself a bastard. It was a gesture that called for tact and sympathy in return. I gave him an understanding look.

"Might I be allowed to see inside?"

Inside it looked just as a *bistro* ought to look. A dark, long room with low wooden panelling imitating red marble. Above it a long row of wall mirrors one beside the other. Here and there (where the interval between the wall mirrors exceeded a couple of feet) a smaller oval mirror of the kind which wine firms often give away as advertisements. From the middle of the sooty ceiling protruded a round clock supported on two bronze arms, but as behoves and befits a French café clock, it had presumably long since ceased to register the passage of time. Durand noticed my looking at it.

"It isn't much of a thing. Perhaps it ought really to be taken down, but my wife thinks that it looks very well where it is. She says it gives the room balance."

And in a pensive tone of voice he added: "The clock-maker assures me that he can mend it, but I cannot see why I should incur such an expense just to supply people with the time for nothing."

Short settees upholstered in dark brown leather and red painted tables stood arranged in the style of the old Pullman car. It was like the dining-car of a vanished age. In the middle of the floor was a coke stove dominating the picture. A thick pipe shot up from it towards the ceiling, but bent a few feet before it reached so high and disappeared through a little back window, one pane in which had been replaced by a sheet of metal painted black. Both the stove and the pipe had been painted with bright aluminium paint. Starting at the tobacco kiosk, the classical *bistro* counter stretched in a sweep across the front part of the room. Four nickel coffee machines stood there stiffly side by side, and above the rim of the bar I could glimpse beer pulls. The shelves behind were crowded with bottles of wine and aperitifs. It seemed to me that there could not be room for many more bottles, but Durand assured me that what I could see was only the beginning of what would have to be. The long bar terminated in the cash

desk, in shape exactly like an old-fashioned desk in a country school. Beside it stood a melancholy drooping miniature palm in a reddish-brown pot.

It was a true *bistro*, dark and shabby, permeated by that almost sublime ugliness which, in accordance with the law of the incomprehensibility of all things, makes the Paris café the pleasant place it is. Certain intellectuals like to assert that if a horde of architects, who were men of taste and culture, were loosed to transform the old-fashioned cafés, they would make them more attractive. I doubt it. The traditional *bistro* is like a worn and well-smoked pipe. The gentry of the sanitary department may bristle, but like a good pipe the *bistro* has and ought to have layers of soot on its walls, and a specific odour which certain sensitive noses find repellent, but which is pleasant to the connoisseur. The emphasis, however, is on the word traditional. A new fashion is being tried out here and there in cafés which gleam with nickel and chromium, and where strip-lighting dazzles the thirsty entrant with its cold and inhospitable light. Luckily Durand did not possess the necessary economic backing for such alterations, for otherwise he would certainly have made them, though how far he would have gone is a different matter. Durand also showed me the so-called offices of his new possession. We walked into a small gloomy corridor with a hand basin and a tap on one wall and three doors in the other. The first led to the telephone; the second led to the toilet. He asked me to take a look inside to see a certain "little technical finesse" as he expressed it. This was a convenience of that· so thoroughly inconvenient type which consists of a hole in the floor and two raised foot rests.

"There is a great advantage about those foot rests; they are made longer than usual. In most cafés people with large feet are compelled to perform a difficult balancing act, but my customers will have no such problem," said he and laughed.

A thin wall with wide cracks down by the floor separated this

triumph of technique from the kitchen where we could hear Madame Durand clattering with her pots.

"Jeanette, here is someone you must come and meet."

It is strange how often names are linked with certain associations. I don't know why, but for me Jeanette always conjures up a picture of a little chic graceful Parisienne with plenty of wit and all the *je ne sais pas quoi* of the song. When Durand opened the door I could at first see nothing but a billowing fat woman who seemed to be overflowing and penetrating every corner of that pokey little place. Hurriedly she dried her hands on a towel, wiped some wisps from her forehead and held out her hand with a sunny smile. For all her grotesqueness her appearance was by no means unattractive. The face with its indefinite features, or rather its absence of feature, was lit up by that engaging warmth which so many fat people seem able to convey. She must have been about fifty.

"Jeanette, here is our first customer, and besides, an old acquaintance."

"I hope that Monsieur will come here often. Anyway come and have lunch one day, there are one or two things I can do, though I say so myself."

Her gay laugh bared a row of clumsily made false teeth. It seemed to me that she would have her work cut out to cook anything at all in that miserable little kitchen. There was no built-in refrigerator, no stainless steel, no cunning cupboards in Madame Durand's laboratory. A wooden draining-board and a sink of grey sandstone, a gas cooker without an oven standing beside it, bare shelves cluttered with pots and tins, grey walls on which the damp had drawn maps in the grease with which they were covered. The free floor space cannot have been more than a yard square, and it was quite incomprehensible how that voluminous woman could perform the movements the preparation of food requires.

"My wife makes an *escalope à la crème* which will bear comparison with anybody's."

"Don't give away secrets," said Madame. "Monsieur must see for himself."

When I finally left Café Select it was nearly dark. Wine and conversation both take time. Madame Jeanette stood in the door and waved her podgy hand. Durand accompanied me a few steps of the way. It was a satisfied man who walked beside me, a man who had seen his life's dream come true. I experienced that refreshing sensation that you always get from meeting people who are happy, if only because it is so seldom that one does. It seemed that there was only one thing left for which Durand longed: a terrace. In French café idiom that is a word of unusual significance. You sit down at one of the two tables standing on the pavement outside a *bistro*, and the waiter who takes your order calls to those within: "Two coffees for the terrace." Three tables and a few chairs comprise a terrace. If it is framed by a couple of walls to keep out the wind and equipped with an awning against sun and rain, then it is an elegant terrace. If the proprietor can put a coal or a gas stove there when the chill of autumn begins to make itself felt, then it is a terrace with *confort moderne*. Durand dreamt of such a terrace with heating and protection from the wind.

"If I could afford a gas stove it would be wonderful. There are some new terrace models on the market. You saw them last winter on Boulevard Montmartre."

The street lighting had just been turned on and made the trees in Place Dauphine gleam a theatrical green. On Pont Neuf the big candelabra were shining in two colours: yellow facing the carriage way and the pavements, red towards the river as a warning to vessels that the bridge was there. A barge came chugging along, but in the gathering darkness you could not see much more than its red and green lights. The outline of Henri IV and his steed had also become blurred.

# 2

Three months is a long time in a café's existence, if you count from its opening day. Could this be the *bistro* that I had chanced upon on that first day of spring? Café Select appeared to be in full swing. People were sitting at most of the tables and four men had laid fat brief-cases on the counter and were standing at the bar drinking beer. They were talking politics. Durand was expounding his views on the general rascality of the government and prognosticating its immediate resignation (even though it had only been in office for three days). His daughter had returned home and was installed in the glass kiosk with the tobacco and cigarettes. That regrettable mésalliance with the tax-collector in Nantes no longer cast its shadow over the family, nor was there any sign that she missed her collector. It was a smiling and piquantly rounded little woman who looked out between two piles of *Weekend* and *Balto*. Her mischievously laughing eyes were of the "try to kiss me if you can" type.

"Colette is an attraction," said Durand after our formal greetings were over. "People go quite a distance out of their way to buy their cigarettes here."

"The family's grown, I can see."

"And by more than one. Lou-lou."

He whistled. Lou-lou came bouncing between the tables. A mongrel of that indefinable brand that belongs to the equipment of all cafés in Paris. Certain parts of the dog, in particular its tail and left ear, had a resemblance to an Alsatian, but elsewhere you could discern elements of both poodle and airedale. It was a dog that looked both cheeky and unreliable, and there was an expression in its eyes that made you feel slightly anxious for your ankles.

Durand appeared to consider the animal a model of beauty. He pressed his face into its shaggy coat and exclaimed in a tone of impassioned tenderness:

"Isn't she enchanting!" and Colette stuck her head out from her glass house.

"*Un amour, Monsieur!*"

Lou-lou got up on her hind legs and requited the compliment with a wet kiss on Colette's lips which disarranged her mouth and left traces of red on the creature's moustache.

"The nicest dog in the world," exclaimed Colette, diving into her bag for her lipstick. "Don't bite Monsieur's trousers." But there was more admiration than authority in the order.

"Lou-lou appears to have a good appetite," said I, for it was time for me to say something. "Isn't she expensive to feed?"

"Not at all. The customers are so kind."

I beg the reader to pay particular attention to that reply: "The customers are so kind." It contains the clue to the dark secret of the café dogs of Paris. Paris is a dogs' city where the dog is worshipped and adored as though it were a sacred animal. There is a whole branch of industry devoted to satisfying its wishes and requirements: harnesses with armorial bearings, rain-coats, galoshes, sun-glasses, specially constructed rubber bones that smell of chocolate, meat or fish according to individual taste, collars shaped like white butterfly collars, special perfumes and hair-waving apparatus. The restaurateur flings his door wide open to them and lets them get up beside their owners on the sofas, and sometimes will even provide a special *menu de chien* which is served under the table on a little cloth of many colours spread on the floor. To swear at a dog is far worse than to swear at a person. Knowing this, it will be easier to understand the tyrannical position occupied by the café dog, at least in those cafés where food is provided. The creature is owned by the proprietor of the café, but fed by the customers. It goes from table to table, collecting a

private restaurant tax: a bit of meat here, a bit of bread there. If you try to pay no attention to its blackmail it will show its teeth and give you a nudge in the side with its nose. If you still fail to react those at the neighbouring tables will start exclaiming *sotto voce*: "What a greedy pig!" "Some people really are mean!" "Fancy being so unfriendly to a little dog!" Then you become embarrassed and throw the brute the better part of your plateful.

Lou-lou's activities in Select were only a week or two old, but already her technique was perfect. Perhaps she had previously worked at another café. My companion had sat down and was waiting at a table at the far end of the room. As I seated myself Lou-lou took up position close beside us. She drew attention to her existence with a growl and stared at us with a menacing gleam in her eye. I bought a momentary peace by pouring the contents of the sugar bowl on to the floor. My companion, whose love of dogs was obviously as unbounded as that of all other Frenchmen, found this a perfectly natural thing to do. He beamed delightedly and said:

"You know, that old saying about the dog being man's best friend is right after all. But where's the cat?" he added. "Haven't they got a cat here?"

It was a perfectly justifiable question in that city where the dog comes first, then the cat, and after them man. Cats are taken out for walks on elegant leads. They compete for challenge cups in exhibition halls, and are decked with silk rosettes and tinkling bells. Not so long ago there were large advertisements in several newspapers announcing the loss of an angora and promising a rich reward to the finder. It was to be identified by a diamond collar worth £7,000. The cat, too, is a sacred animal, its position somewhat reminiscent of that of the ibis in ancient Egypt. It is as indispensable for a self-respecting café as a dog. Durand happened to hear my companion's question and felt that he must defend the honour of his café.

"We have ordered two cats, Monsieur, they will arrive next week," he assured us.

But to return to Madame Durand and her *escalope à la crème* which – surely an unnecessary explanation? – consists of a thin slice of veal cooked in cream, and which, when prepared with talent, is one of the finest achievements of French cooking. There was a hint of reproach in Durand's voice when he reminded me that I had not yet sampled Madame's speciality. And one can understand it. If the proprietor of an eating place in Balham were to suggest that you sample the excellence of his meat loaf or the proprietor of a *Gasthof* in Germany try to tempt you with an especially fat pork sausage that would be one thing, but it is quite another when a French restaurateur advises an esteemed customer to try a certain dish, which it is wished to prepare for him with especial care. It is in fact an invitation with artistic pretensions. In principle there is nothing to distinguish it from the invitation of an artist to come and view his last picture or from a musician to listen to his latest composition. You do not jokingly dismiss a suggestion of that kind without running the risk of giving offence. Art is not a subject for jesting. An invitation like that should be accepted, and you should feel yourself honoured.

This respectful attitude to eating is thoroughly typical, and presumably arises out of that realistic view of life so characteristic of the French and which explains a good deal both of their negative and positive sides. Man, says the Frenchman, has only one short lifetime at his disposal, consequently he must take due care of it. It is besides a life the pleasant ingredients of which are mixed with many dangers and traps of various kinds. It is a jungle through which he has to elbow his way with the cool brain and a good deal of scepticism and mistrust without indulging in weakening sentimentality. Realism, however, also requires that the pleasurable things should be fully exploited – though within reason – before it is too late. Food is one of the most important of

pleasurable things, and, to the mind of the Frenchman, he who denies that is either underdeveloped or a hypocrite. It is, besides, this absence of hypocrisy which makes the French so difficult for other nations to understand. Seeing that food is incontestably an important object of pleasure, it is logical and also right to make it as good as possible. That is to say, to ennoble it so that the sensations of taste become more and more pleasurable. It is but a step from this attitude to the recognition of cooking as an art. This step was taken several centuries ago. The art of cooking is now well established and generally recognized as an important civilizing factor. Not even the ascetic François Mauriac could conceivably deny the pre-eminence of cooking in French culture. You may object, perhaps, that this is materialism at its worst. Quite wrong, answers the Frenchman, a fine art can never be exclusively materialistic. It is at the table, when accompanied by exquisite food and noble wines, that the spirit blossoms out to the full. And he will have plenty of quotations to back him up. Did not La Rochefoucauld say that to eat is a necessity, but to eat in the right way an art? And Antoine de Rivarol expressly maintained that "The great thoughts come from the belly", while Baudelaire, in his famous panegyric on wine, contemptuously asserted that a man who drinks nothing but water has a secret which he must hide from his fellows.

All France seems permeated by this mixture of admiration and respect for the pleasures of the table. The French are often well up in the history of their country and not least in that of its civilization, but what would seem to have etched itself most sharply into their memories is the gastronomic anecdote. There cannot be many who have not heard of Tallyrand's chef Carème over whom the Russian and English courts indulged in such a tug of war. Try to find a Frenchman who has not heard of Louis XIV's Vatel who fell at his post, for one day when the fish arrived too late, he ran a rapier through his stomach. Or the story

of Brillat-Savarin's mother, who in her youth had been a great beauty and generally called *La belle aurore*. When that celebrated lady reached the respectable age of 100 and felt her end approaching, she decided to devote the last of her strength to a good dinner. It was served her on her death-bed. But for some reason or other there was a delay over the sweet. Then *La belle aurore* called in a faint voice "Bring the sweet quickly, I am dying". To the Englishman, *La belle aurore's* end is a trifle shocking, to the Frenchman it is disarming. I remember once telling a French friend how one of the best-known commentators of the *Talmud* spent fifteen years of his life trying to discover the recipe for the mess of potage for which Esau sold his birthright to Jacob. "*Formidable!*" exclaimed my friend, and there was admiration in his voice. Apparently it did not occur to him that those were fifteen wasted years. If it should appear remarkable to you that a man like Brillat-Savarin should have expended all that labour on compiling a gastronomic "bible" "*La physiologie du goût*", no Frenchman will really agree with you. If you should express your surprise that there isn't a professor of gastronomy in such a land of devotees of food as France, he will find your surprise fully justified and will be prepared at once to propose candidates for such a chair; people of whose names you will never have heard, but who apparently have acquired great celebrity entirely from their gastronomic erudition. If you should point out that in northern countries such a person would very likely be called a glutton he will perhaps say nothing, but in his eyes you will be able to read a growing conviction thta those are countries on the very fringes of the civilized world.

It being generally accepted that the art of cooking is one of the corner-stones of civilization, it follows that the works of art concocted in the kitchen are not to be consumed just anyhow. Respect for the art finds expression in etiquette and formality. It is said that England has the best table manners and the worst food, while in

France it is the other way round. If by manners you mean the way knife and fork are handled, then undoubtedly there is a good deal of truth in the saying. The French do not possess the Englishman's mastery of those instruments. Their etiquette takes other forms. The composition of a meal, or rather the order in which the courses are served, is as arbitrary as the protocol of any court. It is not a question of an upper-class custom, but of a convention accepted by the entire people without exception. The tourist who rushes into a little restaurant where they are not accustomed to foreigners and orders a lunch consisting of an omelette and a cup of coffee will find himself badly served. What he does not realize is that he has been guilty of the same breach of etiquette as if you had sat down in a restaurant without collar and tie. This formalism is even more apparent in the wine districts. As a country, France is poor in drinking songs. In fact, the French regard the drinking song as the first step towards unconsciousness, which reduces the role of wine to that of a lubricant for the throat. The foreigner who wishes to see a gleam of respect lit in the eyes of a head-waiter – and head-waiters see everything – should not neglect to observe certain rules. Prior to tasting the wine he ought not to smoke, or drink any strong aperitif, and immediately before the decisive moment he ought to "neutralize" his mouth by eating a piece of bread. He should not complain if his glass is not filled more than half-way, that makes the aroma more concentrated. He should regard the glass with the gaze of a philosopher and inhale the aroma with closed eyes. Then and then only may he taste it. The wine is drunk in large sips which are either "chewed" or used to rinse the mouth, as it were, and the whole thing is in reality very close to a sacred rite. If the foreigner observes these rules he will see an expression of admiration, almost of affection, appear in the eyes of the head-waiter. He has proved that he is culturally adult, his national stock will have risen.

"Ah, Monsieur is Swedish, *ça doit être un pays merveillieux.*"

This glorification of food and drink may appear grotesque, but it helps to make daily life less everyday. That mealtimes are regarded as periods of worship has the advantage that the time for such worship is generally respected. The twenty minutes for lunch idea is incomprehensible barbarity. From the point of view of productivity the French system is perhaps reprehensible, and presumably there would be more new houses, better electric installations and more modern taxis in Paris if the quick lunch method were adopted. It is not impossible that rubbish chutes might be a common phenomenon, but it is by no means certain that the Parisians would be any happier because of them, or that the civilized rhythm of life which makes Paris the unique capital city that it is, could be maintained in other spheres once it were broken there. The one thing must be put against the other. To the French personal well-being weighs very heavily. One must also remember that the same Frenchman who regards his two hours for lunch as a civic right works like a mule both beforehand and afterwards. The picture of the average Frenchman as an indolent butterfly is mere myth. In fact his industry, in so far as it serves his own interests, is on a par with that of the ant or the busy bee.

Gastronomically he is capable of showing great energy. He can cover long distances in search of a restaurant of which someone has told him. On a journey he consults the specialist literature in which the hundreds of thousands of eating-places in France are classified according to their specialities and quality. The world-famous motor-tyre firm of Michelin in Clermont-Ferrand publishes each year a thick guide-book with a cover as red as the inside of an *entrecôte*, which is the undisputed best-seller of France. A little army of professional gourmets in the firm's service spend their time travelling round the country, investigating

the gastronomic qualities of the eating places. Good places receive one star, and very good ones two. Gastronomic temples are given three. These travelling experts are anonymous, exacting and incorruptible. To be allotted even one star is itself a decisive event in an innkeeper's life. His prestige is established, and the economic consequences are that motorists who find themselves in the neighbourhood will gladly go out of their way to eat his food. If *Guide Michelin* decorates him with two stars it is like being made a member of an order of chivalry, for he joins a company of only sixty names. Three stars is something incredible like winning first prize in a lottery. There are only seven places in the whole country that have that honour. As well as these professional guides there is a widespread individual freemasonry as regards restaurant addresses. People whisper them in confidence to each other. They are given as a present or in gratitude for some service received. It was once suggested to me that in return for a certain cash payment I could have divulged to me the secret of where the best *bouillabaisse* in all France was served. The address of a good and unknown restaurant voluntarily given is a very considerable proof of friendship. An offer from such a place to sample a speciality is an honour, and so to return to Madame Durand's *escalope*. Two weeks after I had made the acquaintance of Lou-lou I rang up Café Select. Durand answered.

"Keep me a table for lunch. At last I'm coming to try your *escalope.*"

"Ah, so unfortunate, Monsieur. Today it happens to be impossible. We have suffered great grief."

There was a moment's silence.

"Lou-lou is dead."

He told me, and I could hear from his voice what an effort it cost him, that Lou-lou had been the object of a loathsome and tragic *attentat*. A chance customer of whom nobody knew anything, but who had looked an unreliable sort of person, had be-

come irritated by the dog's presence. Lou-lou had made it known in a thoroughly friendly manner that she considered the person in question should share with her the very liberally sized pork chop on his plate. An unpleasant smile had then come upon the stranger's face. Before anybody had time to stop him he had flung the chop straight into the dog's gaping mouth with such diabolic accuracy that the bone became wedged across it and Lou-lou's supply of air was cut off. When the vet. they summoned had at length arrived Lou-lou was already dead. In the general commotion the culprit had made good his escape. (Here I must put in that a later conversation with a barrister who lunched daily at Select produced a very different version of the drama. He had been sitting at the next table. He had noticed nothing suspect about the stranger's appearance, on the contrary, his face had seemed if anything weak, almost frightened. Lou-lou had demanded his attention with angry growls, and had emphasized her pretensions to the chop by nipping the unknown's trouser leg. The stranger had then thrown his entire helping to her. "The action," said the barrister – and he should have known with his legal training – "can hardly be regarded as a premeditated attempt at murder, but rather as a reflex of timid apprehension released by the threat of physical violence.")

"A repulsive person," said Durand in an agitated tone of voice. "*Un sale type.*"

I agreed.

"Madame Durand is completely shattered." Due to the gravity of the occasion he had called his wife Madame Durand.

"The funeral will be at the dogs' cemetery at Saint Ouen."

"If you have no objection I should like to come."

"Of course not. It is this afternoon at four o'clock."

The foregoing may perhaps have given the impression that I don't like dogs, so let me at once state that that is not the case. I am the owner of and slave to a charming poodle who, in his

so-called master's eyes, is one of the most intelligent dogs that has ever walked on four legs. But it is the same with dogs as with people: some are nice and some aren't. (Though the latter are not nearly so frequent in the canine world.) The café hound Lou-lou's thoroughly characteristic demise aroused no grief in my heart; but I was of course sorry for the Durands, and it was only natural that I should wish to show such decent people a little sympathy by attending the ceremony. I had, however, never been to a dog's funeral and did not know what the etiquette might be. Questions amongst my friends left me as ignorant as before, and I had no alternative but to go to the place and ask. At three o'clock I drove out to the cemetery which lay on a narrow island in the Seine. Over a pompous gateway were carved the words *Cimetière des Chiens*. Slowly an iron gate opened and you walked into a cemetery that in lay-out, tombstones and flowers was a replica of any ordinary cemetery, only in miniature. The first thing that met my eyes was a sculptured stone monument to the St. Bernard *Barry* who saved so many lives endangered in the Alps but finally fell victim to man's ingratitude:

BARRY
SAVED THE LIVES OF FORTY PEOPLE AND
WAS KILLED BY THE FORTY-FIRST

runs the inscription. Immediately beside it was a stone raised over the horse Gribouille – "A good, friendly and beautiful white horse" – who worked at the cemetery for twenty-five years and was mourned by his owner "as one mourns a good servant and a friend". Beyond was a forest of monuments in miniature; mausoleums over the dogs of the rich and simpler monuments over their poor relations. Here and there fresh flowers had been laid, and there was a sprinkling of people with flower pots and trowels. On many of the gravestones was a photograph or a relief sculpture of the departed faithful servant. There must have

been thousands of dogs buried on that lovely little island which contrasted so strangely with the grim and gloomy tenements of the slums on either side. Some of the stones bore only the dog's name, but they were in the minority. On the others there was no end to the variety of inscription. For example there was *Mosque*: "A mourned and faithful friend"; *Ben-ben*: "Always cheery, faithful and friendly" (one could wish for a worse epitaph); *Mirette*: "The best friend in my life"; *Bobby*: "Died the day after his mistress"; *Papillon*: "Police-dog six years' service in 16th arrondissement" . . . But mostly there were inscriptions expressing the owner's disillusionment with his or her fellowmen: "My only comfort in an evil world" . . . "Never disappointed me as did my friends among men" . . . "An example to mankind" . . . "*Plus je vois les hommes, plus j'aime mon chien*" . . . "Did not know what human wickedness was" . . .

From that cemetery there rises a poignant cry of human disillusionment, and it is difficult to describe one's reactions. If you think that an animal is after all only an animal the whole thing appears morbid and exaggerated. My poodle is not going to be buried in any special cemetery. But when you think that those fulsome inscriptions must be sincere and genuine, you feel that you are faced with a personal matter about which you do not have the right to judge. A person who does not love animals would presumably consider the cemetery in bad taste, but when you do love them you find that you are not quite sure what to think.

An attendant was busy setting up a white stone over a fresh grave ("*Jacko – 9 ans de tendresse et d'amour*"). In the cautious phraseology which my peculiar surroundings seemed to require I requested information about the funeral ceremonial.

The man looked surprised. "There isn't any ceremony. A dog is a dog. You shove it into the ground and that's that."

"No accepted formalities?"

"None whatever. That, Monsieur, is just what distinguishes a dog's funeral from a person's. Here you only get people who really felt something for the deceased. No conventional sympathy. No oration. No artificial expressions of grief on the faces of so-called friends who loathed the deceased while he was still alive. No hypocrisy, a dog's burial is an honest burial."

I went into the lodge and wrote a few lines on a visiting card which they promised to give to Durand when he arrived: "Cher Monsieur Durand, a newspaper man is the slave of unforeseen events. Unfortunately I have suddenly been ordered . . ."

I sampled Madame Durand's *escalope à la crème* on another occasion and it proved all that had been promised. She emerged from her kitchen triumphant, red-faced, her hair disarranged, wearing a stained and dirty apron over her spotted cotton dress, and made the round of the tables. A judge of the seventh department in the Palais de Justice kissed her hand.

From the number of new faces I kept seeing in Select it was obvious that Madame Durand's conquests were many, yet I know of one she did not make, but that was due to the gas strike. The gas pressure was so low that the housewives of Paris had to hold their breath when they lit the gas. Madame Durand was a heavy breather and could not keep the flame alight beneath her pots for more than a few minutes at a time. I had taken some Swedish friends visiting Paris to Select. One and all were enchanted and as usual amazed by the typically French contrast between the mean furnishings of the restaurant and the high quality of the food, all, that is, except a business man from Malmö. He, in an attempt to find the telephone, got by mistake into Madame's kitchen. Alleging an important appointment he left the café with a very thoughtful expression on his face. However, there was no doubt that Select had become an eating-place of some rank. It could not boast of a star in *Guide Michelin*; it was not even

mentioned there, but it had already established a local reputation which was rapidly spreading beyond the limits of the Cité island. At lunch time there were always people lounging against the bar waiting for a table. As far as one could judge the venture appeared to be proving most successful.

Mostly I went there alone. For those whom their fellows interest and entertain a café provides amusing material for study. A great city is above all the people in it, not its buildings and monuments. Paris is a cauldron in which bubbles an odd hotch-potch of everything, of good and evil, of honest folk and dishonest people, of astounding luxury and amazing poverty. The café presents a microcosm of that strange world.

Those who lunched at Select were mostly lawyers from the Palais de Justice and clerks and officials from the Prefecture de Police, but the tobacco kiosk brought in both those who considered it beneath their dignity to eat at a *bistro* and such as found Select's prices too high for their pockets. Thus the picture was made complete. Among the regular customers was the Marquis de Birac, who each afternoon came in for a Henry Clay before setting out on his daily hunt for ivory miniatures. He never bought a box, always just the one cigar at a time, apparently for the pleasure of enjoying Colette's roguish smile. He was a thin round-shouldered man in his fifties and sufficiently rich to be able to live the life of a gentleman, which means not having to descend to the adoption of a profession. It was said in the inner circle at Select that he had offered sweet Colette his "protection" after his previous mistress had been tactless enough to get married.

As well as this aristocrat there was a female rag-and-bone merchant among Select's regular customers, an unpleasant, evil-smelling megaera with a hoarse voice who used to ask to be allowed to owe a few pence on her packet of *Gauloises*. The aristocratic hunter of miniatures and the female representative of the city's scum were the two extremes. Between them was a richly

varied social scale of customer, most of whom you soon learned to recognize. A *bistro* being like a village, with the latter's gossiping and confidences, you learned various facts about the personal affairs of most of them.

At first I tried playing private detective and amused myself by trying to place the various types without asking questions, but judging by appearance, behaviour, clothes and other externals. It was not a fruitful method. There was, for example, an elderly man who came in at regular intervals to buy pipe tobacco. He was the exaggeratedly considerate type of man who seems to live in a perpetual horror of being in the way. It would never have occurred to him to protest if he had been barged aside in a queue. If he happened to brush against one of the other customers he at once apologized. If a newspaper had ever got up a competition for the most insignificant-looking man in France – and there are no limits to the eccentricities of Parisian newspaper editors in this respect – he would have had every prospect of winning. His ill-fitting and smooth-worn clothes spoke of financial straits. I decided that I could safely label him "member of the proletariat of pensioned civil servants". A former departmental head living out his days in the miserable straits which are the lot of the retired civil servant in so expensive a place as Paris, was what I put him down as being. Nothing could have been wider off the mark. Clothes, like all externals, do not tell you much about a Frenchman. With French women it is different. France is a country of badly-dressed men and well-dressed women. That shiny-clothed man with the insignificant appearance was a very rich industrialist with a wonderful apartment in the Quai des Orfèvres. According to Durand he also owned a château on the Loire. After that I grew cautious and decided to make use of the café's information service which was always active and thorough.

How often doesn't it happen that if you possess a little know-

ledge about a person in whom you are interested, outward appearances and manners give amusing confirmation of what you already know? There was a ticket-inspector on the Metro who used to buy lottery tickets at Select. Ten years of working underground had given him a strange greyish complexion the shade of which was exactly that of the walls of the Metro tunnels. Another of Colette's customers was a policeman who directed the traffic at Rond Point des Champs Élysées with a white baton. It was strange to see how his work had affected even his gestures when handling a cigarette.

You sometimes read of the "typical" Parisian. What a rash generalization that is! Can you describe the typical Londoner or Stockholmer? Yet among the customers of Café Select there was one whom, even though I dare not call him a typical Parisian, was at least typical of one important aspect of life in Paris. He seemed to know everybody. He shook hands to right and left. He was called Monsieur Pitou. He was a spivishly smart little man with a gold chain bracelet round one wrist and a chain of gold teeth in his mouth. His face had a friendly and above all helpful expression, but his helpfulness was professional. It was his livelihood. Monsieur Pitou earned his living as *intermédiaire*.

*Les intermédiaires* have become both the curse and the salvation of postwar Paris. If a housewife requires an electric hotplate, she would hate to buy it in a shop and would only do so as a last resort. First she investigates whether she does not happen to know someone whom in his or her turn might conceivably be acquainted with a man whose business it was to sell electric hotplates. That way it might be cheaper. She knows perhaps that so-and-so has connections with so-and-so and so-and-so, and the latter deals in vacuum cleaners. Is it not likely that a vacuum cleaner agent would be in contact with those who made hotplates? There follows as much activity in the form of telephone conversations, meetings and confidential correspondence as

though a conspiracy were being mounted. The probable end is that she gets her hotplate five shillings cheaper than in a shop. Besides that, on the hotplate's journey from the manufacturer to the housewife one or two people will have discreetly earned a tiny commission. The explanation of this phenomenon lies presumably partly in the fact that retailers as a matter of course look for a high rate of profit, and partly in the grotesque discrepancies in prices in different parts of the city. A shoe that in Champs Élysées costs 80*s.* will only cost 55*s.* in a small shop in Menilmontant; consequently it pays to spend five shillings on obtaining the address. The time and energy Parisians have to expend in making their money go round! The really important thing is to know as many people as possible in as many different trades and professions as possible. Since the second world war Paris has been like a field undermined by tens of thousands of mole tunnels, along which *les intermédiaires* dash in all directions like fieldmice. You have to know the geography of that secret network. He who possesses a superior knowledge of it can turn that into cash by acting as economic guide. Monsieur Pitou was one who possessed that knowledge. "Monsieur Pitou, you who have such good connections, I badly need . . ." "Count on me, Madame!" "Monsieur Pitou, I'm looking for a new car, but delivery dates are so hopeless . . ." "I'll do what I can, Monsieur!" With his jacket pocket bulging with telephone *jetons* Monsieur Pitou disappears into the telephone box which he uses as an office. He can get you anything, from an electric iron to female companions for foreign tourists.

We got to know, too, another and more refined representative of the great army of go-betweens: Madame la Générale Duchet. Madame la Générale was in her sixties, the widow of a garrison commander whose memory had been buried with his body. Nobody knew anything about him. However, his widow made great efforts to keep the name of Duchet alive. Her assets seemed

to be a large flat on Quai d'Horloge, a 1920 model motorcar, a modest widow's pension, an elderly chauffeur willing to take a small wage, and a Pekinese called Tu-Tu. Her pension must have been modest even before the war. In postwar Paris it had shrunk to practically nothing. Naturally the normal thing for her to have done would have been to have given up flat, car and chauffeur and to have installed herself and Tu-Tu in a home for aged and distressed officers' widows. She avoided that fate thanks to the possession of three other valuable assets: social ambition, inexhaustible energy and a well-developed ability for intrigue and manipulation. Thanks to them she was able to maintain the outward appearance of a *grande dame*. She very seldom appeared in Select. Our information came from the chauffeur, Pierre, who daily bought cigarettes for his mistress and himself. However, it did happen sometimes that the old lady grew tired of sitting waiting in her aged Voisin. She would look in through the open door and call:

"My good Pierre, try to hurry!"

What we saw then was an impressive silver-haired woman with a back as straight as a poker, deeply chiselled features and a piercing gaze. She also had bright red lips, for in France not even old ladies dispense with lipstick. She was strikingly elegant. You did not require an expert's eye to see that she was dressed by the great fashionable couturiers. If she had belonged to a different age-group you would probably have guessed that her favours were for sale. But far from it. She was a business woman. She kept herself going as *intermédiaire*.

Pierre, the chauffeur, was a loquacious individual with a consuming need of imparting everything to everybody. There was thus no great difficulty in reconstructing a typical day in the life of that old Parisienne.

In the morning Pierre drives his mistress and Tu-Tu to the Bois de Boulogne. At Avenue des Acacias she gets out and walks the Pekinese for a quarter of an hour or so while Pierre follows

slowly in the car. Then business. She drives to two or three of the best-known fashion houses. There are commissions to be collected, either in the form of clothes or in cash. The General's widow is an obtainer of customers and thanks to a widespread network of connections a very successful one. Then follows lunch at the Ritz or George V. There will be waiting for her there say a business man from the provinces who has made his money during the Occupation. There he sits with his daughter, now of marriageable age. What are the first and foremost requirements of a young lady whose parents previously earned their livelihood with a butcher's shop in Bordeaux? A suitable and *chic* course, to take which will provide an excuse for staying in Paris. Lessons in *savoir-vivre*. Introductions. In these spheres Madame la Générale is as at home as a fish in water. After lunch, tea with a rich American who has bought a house at Neuilly and wishes to obtain a footing in the great world. Another of her specialities. A cocktail party is arranged in the Neuilly villa. The American woman provides the refreshments, Madame la Générale delivers the guests. Pierre trudges to the Post Office with bundles of invitations. So many are sent out that if even one third were to bite it would be a fine party.

In the evening she is off to Marigny theatre where Jean-Louis Barrault and Madeleine Renault have a première. Madame la Générale is magnificent in her evening finery. And she must be magnificent. A première in Paris is not like a first night elsewhere in other capitals. You cannot buy tickets for it. You are invited. The director of the theatre keeps a special list of people who are invited. These are political, artistic, literary celebrities, high officials, members of the aristocracy and the world of finance. It is what is known as Tout-Paris. For members of this clan to be seen at first nights is essential for their existence. The intrigues and manipulations that are employed to get put on to a good list sometimes approach the comical. To be crossed off is tantamount

to a social catastrophe. The theatre managers, on their part, want to have a "good" house. That means a lot in publicity. Consequently the list has to be revised every so often. They have to eliminate those who, for one reason or another, have disappeared from the public eye. Here and there a widow has to be amputated, her altered financial status no longer making it possible for her to make good her social pretensions. Room must be made for new stars in the firmament of society. As far as the Marigny theatre was concerned it was only by the skin of her teeth that Madame Duchet managed to keep her name on the list. It was not difficult to imagine what it would have meant to her to have her name struck off, and so the day that Pierre came in and told us that Madame la Générale had not received an invitation to a forthcoming first night, we all experienced a surge of sympathy for her.

"It has been a hard blow," said Pierre. "She has had a slight heart attack. I have just been for the doctor."

"I don't understand how they can treat a fine old lady in that way!" exclaimed Madame Durand, who immediately recognized the implications of the catastrophe. "As though Madame Duchet wasn't as good as all those film tarts who pop up everywhere and throw their weight about."

But Madame la Générale had no intention of giving in without a struggle. Next day she was on her feet again. Pierre had to drive her swiftly from one contact to the other. By late afternoon four recognized first-night lions had promised to intercede for her with the management. She was promised that her name would be restored for the next première. On this occasion it was too late. The tickets had already been sent out. The old lady, wishing to have the insult wiped out without delay, pulled still more strings and for that première they placed a stool in one of the side gangways in the stalls. She was most uncomfortable, but she was *there*. She could smile the smiles she was so anxious to smile; she could shake the hands it was so important for her to shake. When

Pierre drove her back to the Cité island after the performance the old lady was as happy and joyful as a seventeen-year-old debutante.

"What did Madame think of the play?"

"What a silly question! Do you imagine that I have time to worry about what is happening on the stage? For me there is but the one play. The first act takes place in the stalls, the second in the foyer, the third back in the stalls again. But I can tell you, Pierre, it has been a wonderful evening!"

"But what then does Madame do when the lights go down?"

Madame la Générale gave a chuckle.

"I will tell you, Pierre, but in confidence. I sleep. At my age, one must take all the rest one can get. And that way one looks fresher when the lights go up."

# 3

I found it most stimulating to watch the little brook of Parisian humanity that ran through Select's *Bureau de Tabac.* But you made no acquaintances there, as you could amongst those who came to have lunch or dinner. The tables stood, as is the French custom, close together and that fostered sociability. At times Durand acted as intermediary by conversing with two tables at a time. Nor was there any real difficulty in starting a conversation on your own.

There was always politics. In France politics take the place of the weather as the introductory gambit *par excellence.* In England you say "Terrible weather, isn't it?" or "What a lovely day!" The true translation of these into French would be "What a lot of rascals the government are!" and "Well, the government's gone and thank God for it!"

I have always been surprised by the lack of psychological insight shown by those who compile English-French conversation handbooks. This is what you ought to find in their lists of useful phrases:

| | |
|---|---|
| Terrible weather, isn't it! | Quel gouvernement criminel! |
| What a lovely day! | Dieu merci, le gouvernement a demissioné. |
| Isn't it hot! | Le ministère semble avoir chaud! |
| Isn't it cold! | Les ministres ont froid dans le dos! |

To me the French method seems superior. Owing to its dependence on the weather the English art of conversation is seasonal and in periods of settled weather it is as hard put to it as a fish out of water. Have you ever noticed the look of helplessness

that comes into the Englishman's eyes when the sun has been blazing out of a cloudless sky for fourteen days at a stretch? God has forsaken him. English conversational art only flourishes in April when it can feed on the swift alterations between rain and sunshine which that month brings. The French with their politics can enjoy the advantages of April all the year round. Personally, I owe a great debt of gratitude to the instability of French governments, and I feel too that a word of thanks is due to the strikes. Not that you ever really need anything as drastic as that to get a conversation going. Owing to the chronic political instability of France there is always something of topical interest. The Parisian studies every nuance in his government's instability with a passion not unlike that of the dipsomaniac. It is not because they are idealists and wish to enlighten the people that the editors of the "yellow" section of the capital's press devote most of the front page to political news. It is what the readers want. The Parisian, whether he is an aristocrat living in Faubourg St. Germain or stands selling shoe-laces outside an entrance to the Metro, feels an inner need to keep *au courant*. From the conversational point of view political instability is a gold mine.

It was thanks to the disturbed state of home affairs that I made the acquaintance of Monsieur Blanchet. On occasion he had occupied the table next to mine, and I had taken advantage of that to study him stealthily. His black hair, exquisitely parted, was showing traces of grey. His regular, slightly furrowed features were of a decorative dignity that would have been more striking if he had not had circles under his eyes. It was, however, what you call an interesting face. Never before or since have I seen a Frenchman eat with such elegance. My neighbour, in fact, provided a fascinating example of *les bonnes manières*. He even refrained from doing certain things that it would cost most Frenchmen a violent effort not to do. For example, gravy: whether it is a specially made gravy or the meat gravy from a *tournedos*, there are three ways of

dealing with it. The first is to take a bit of bread, with it wipe the plate clean and then pop it into your mouth. It isn't pretty, but the taste of it is heavenly. The second method similarly consists of using a bit of bread, but now you steer it with a fork. This method is employed by the refined and very well brought-up. The third method is to forgo the gravy and let it be carried out with your plate. That conflicts directly with two French national characteristics: their love of food and their sense of thrift, and consequently must be regarded as so exclusive as to border on eccentricity. Blanchet belonged to this category of super-aesthetes. There was an expression of mingled admiration and horror in Durand's eyes as he bore out Blanchet's plate on which there usually swam so much gravy that Durand had to be careful not to let it slop over. (Once in the kitchen I have no doubt he took full advantage of such appalling extravagance.)

If a publisher bringing out a book on "etiquette" had wanted a model for illustrations of the art of handling knife and fork, he need only have sent a photographer to Select. The angles between the instruments, as well as the small ellipses and twiddles they sometimes executed, were perfect. Blanchet achieved his masterpiece, however, in peeling an orange. When he did that conversation used to stop at the other tables and all eyes would be riveted on his hands. Yet not even then did they touch the food. He speared the orange on his fork, cut the skin with his knife in such a way that it formed a long, elegant spiral and then let the spiral gently sink on to his plate, where it assumed the appearance of an untouched orange. It was almost a conjuring trick. I learned later that he did exploit the trick professionally. On occasion he would peel an orange for someone supping in the nightclub Le Duc in Montmartre where he was head-waiter. Blanchet was the sole representative of Parisian night life at Select. He moved in a mysterious and unreal world which was foreign to most of Select's patrons, and because of that he aroused as much interest and

attention as if he had been a tourist from some very distant land.

Our acquaintance dated from the day when the taxi strike began. It causes a lot of bother when Paris's taxis stop functioning. For the entertainment world of Montmartre it is a serious affair. Very many of those on pleasure bent disappear at twelve in order to catch the last metro, and the consumption of champagne declines correspondingly. Artistes, waiters and doormen who do not live in Montmartre itself, and many of whom usually club together to take a taxi home, are forced to trudge most horribly through a sleeping city into the grey light of dawn. Blanchet was one such wretched victim. He lived in Cité island. At four o'clock in the morning he had to start off on an hour's walk to get home. No wonder he looked a little irritated when with obviously tender feet he limped into Select for his lunch. He even did something that was quite at variance with his general elegance. He took off a shoe and tenderly pressed his heel. I said something to the effect that a taxi strike as such was quite indefensible. His face lit up and he replied that the whole problem could be removed if the taxi drivers were allowed to put up their fares which were far too cheap anyway. It ought to be done all over the country, he said, and it would besides help to improve the standard of taxis. The question is, I put in, whether the government ought not to intervene. He gave me a complimentary look. It was obvious that by saying that I had given a proof of maturity and comprehension. But Blanchet preferred to feel his way. If the strike was basically the government's fault, then the government should be changed. What changes would I wish to see made? Not knowing anything of Blanchet's politics, this was an awkward question. The wrong answer would mean that our acquaintance would be stillborn. An evasive reply might be taken as fear of showing one's colours. Under cover of a pretended telephone call, I obtained the necessary information from Durand. The nightclub's head-waiter was

an ardent member of the radical-socialist party and thus neither a radical nor a socialist, but a thoroughly bourgeois person of conservative disposition. His ideal politician was Herriot.

"It is, of course, possible that you hold a different opinion, Monsieur," said I, "but as I see things, the socialists and popular radical and moderate ministers should be got rid of and a purely radical-socialist government formed."

There are times when the end justifies the means. An expression of delight appeared in Blanchet's eyes.

"It is really a great pleasure to meet such a perspicacious foreigner. May I be permitted to introduce myself: Blanchet!"

I said my name.

"After all, France has Edouard Herriot," I went on. "Why don't you let Herriot take over the reins? When one possesses a trump, one ought to use it, surely?"

Delight became enthusiasm and Blanchet leaned forward and in a low confidential tone began an eager exposition of the difficulties which faithful radical-socialists encountered in their crusade against the other parties which, despite their separate names, could be lumped together as "devil's brood". He seized my hand and guided me through a labyrinth of intrigue and satanic invention. Like a live biographical dictionary he provided comprehensive descriptions of the leading political personalities outside the radical-socialist ranks, every one of which was libellous. With that picture of what was going on behind the scenes the taxi strike appeared in a new and very interesting light. He had heard that certain politicians of the wrong colour were shareholders in firms manufacturing bicycles, shoes and other goods whose sales would be helped by strikes of that kind. It was obvious that he was convinced of what he said. He believed it all and his voice shook with indignation. However, there was no need to abandon all hope. The struggle which the leading lights of the radical-socialists were conducting against the powers of

darkness might perhaps appear hopeless, but only to the outsider, for the great day was in sight. Thanks to the acquaintance of an acquaintance with connections in the highest circles he possessed exact information on that point.

Thus were the ties of friendship forged, and after that many and fascinating, though quite irresponsible, were the political talks we had. Of course it was weird finding this political pathos in the head-waiter of a nightclub in Montmartre. He frequently and with predeliction used words like right and wrong, moral and immoral. One might have thought that his job in a doubtful restaurant would have occasioned him qualms of conscience. Gradually, however, I discovered that he was a perfect example of the split personality. His life was divided between two planets. By day he was a political idealist and by night a cynical head-waiter. In the former capacity he divided people into two categories: radical-socialists and others, and he felt it his incumbent duty to try and convert all who were not of the true faith. By night he regarded humanity from a purely professional point of view. Again there were just the two categories: staff and customers. His attitude to the latter was reminiscent of the enthusiastic shot's attitude to pheasant or deer. Adeptly and with great energy he exploited all the traps and pitfalls which a nightclub has at its command. Did he succeed in getting a fat note-case to bleed dry, he felt the deep satisfaction of the true sportsman.

There was no conscious humbug in Blanchet's double life. He was a thoroughly honest man. Should a political antagonist accuse him of being inconsistent, of not practising the ideals which he professed, he would at times have recourse to an English parallel. Did not the English gentleman during the week sit in his club in London discussing politics, but on Saturday go to the country and hunt foxes? Blanchet considered that he led the same existence though differently expressed. He regarded this parallel as logical and consequently unassailable. And, since the French

worship logic as a divine being, that argument never failed to make an impression. Personally, it always made me think of a certain brothel-madame who had figured frequently in the papers just after the war. She attended to her business competently and with success, but also found time to devote to higher interests. She was the zealous and esteemed secretary of a political women's club with anti-Nazi tendencies. When the members learned that their secretary was owner of a *maison de tolerance* there was an uproar and her expulsion was demanded. It was decided that the matter should be put to the vote. The worthy lady made a speech in her defence, the logic of which caused many of those present to hesitate. What was the fuss all about? No one could deny that she was a good and efficient secretary and that her politics were all that could be desired. Her *maison* was exemplary of its kind: good commissions, reliable doctors, never any trouble with the police. Certain of the members sought credit in the fact that – here her voice took on a vibrant note – in August 1944, when Paris was liberated, they had showered gifts and kindnesses upon the British and American soldiers, invited them to their houses, etc. Till then she had kept quiet about her own contribution during those historic days. Circumstances now forced her to break that silence. Each one of the first ten Allied soldiers who rang at the door of *La Bonbonnière* had received the gift of a book of coupons entitling him to five gratis visits. As they worked on a fifty-fifty basis the girls, who had enthusiastically agreed to that patriotic sacrifice, had lost 25,000 francs and she herself as much again. "Ladies, love of one's country often flourishes best where you least expect it!" she cried. Nonetheless she lost and was expelled, but the voting was very close.

Blanchet opened my eyes to a number of interesting aspects of Montmartre as a place of work. That is to say, the Montmartre of the night. By day that little Paris hill has not much to offer anyone. To all intents and purposes nothing is left of the artistic life

of the turn of the century. What you will see now is just the chance artist of the international school who happens to have set up his easel in Place du Tertre and is letting his brush depict the architecture of Sacré Cœur which is so ugly at close quarters. Montmartre by day is now almost a Parisian village, dirty, inoffensive and primitive. On the big boulevards at the foot of the hill is the hubbub of a permanent fairground with a Love Barometer, Bearded Ladies and target-shooting with air guns. That always attracts people, and how strange it is that it does. We are told that people today are spoiled as far as entertainment goes, that wireless, films and other wonders of technique are making our pleasures more and more subtle and sophisticated. How can you reconcile that with the fact that in this the second half of the twentieth century you still have long queues of people waiting outside the tents on Boulevard Clichy to see "The World's Most Tattooed Man" or to watch a performance of the flea circus? The Parisian of the 1950's would seem to be as easily amused as was his great-grandfather.

The same question can be put in a different form about the Montmartre of night time. For when the little men have retired to their poky little homes and the shutters have been put up, then comes the transformation scene. The curtain goes up on the Montmartre of night which is as much of an anachronism and an absurdity as the fairground on Boulevard Clichy. It is a constantly recurring phenomenon in Paris that a certain type of quarter moves in the course of the year. Paris's "City" has moved from the Opera quarter to Champs Élysées whereby the former has acquired a dead, museum-like appearance. Since the war the Bohemian centre has moved from Montparnasse to St. Germain-des-Prés. The centre of night-life is, however, Montmartre where it has always been; and not only that, foreigners often find it difficult to understand that Folies Bergères and Casino de Paris keep the same revue going for several years at a stretch, yet they

find nothing peculiar in the fact that exactly the same programme has been performed in the Montmartre theatres for thirty or forty years. Montmartre seems to have the same entitlement to eternal life as the Eiffel Tower or the Arc de Triomphe. If someone who had loved Paris in the early 1900's should suddenly come to life again on Place Pigalle today he would feel thoroughly at home. The same cabaret numbers, the same commercial smiles, the same bad champagne, the same public of foreigners and French provincials. Is that not Lisette standing there in the corner with chubby curves, short legs and mischievous eyes? No, honoured ghost, it is not Lisette, but it is quite possibly her grand-daughter. Notice the way she says her "*Tu viens, cheri?*" You recognize the words and the intonation, don't you? Things are always the same in Montmartre. Sometimes you hear Paris likened to a piquante, dynamic and seductive woman. If one wishes to use the same sort of metaphor for Montmartre then we must call it a painted, horribly skittish old actress, who never brings any new numbers into her repertoire, and whom you are thankful not to have to see by daylight. Montmartre is a sort of Mistinguette.

How strangely unchanged and unchanging is the spectacle you witness in Place Pigalle round about ten o'clock. The people of the night come streaming in, not those who are avid for pleasure, but those who live on the avid and who are then making their way to their places of work. An army of street girls emerges from the *maisons meublées* and takes up position, each at her allotted street corner. Another army, in uniform this time, takes up position at the entrances to the nightclubs and restaurants. These are *les chasseurs*, the porters, who stand outside on the pavement against a background of photographs of naked bosoms and plump behinds, with experienced eyes keeping a look out for tourists. They are masters in their profession. No motorist has time to open the door of his car himself; it is already opened for him by a hand with an itching palm. No one out for a stroll can stop for an

instant and look hesitant without being surrounded by *les chasseurs* ready with a thousand suggestions and guaranteeing a thousand delights. They sell everything and arrange everything, from dirty postcards and secret addresses to smuggled whisky. *La brigade mondaine*, from the police's vice squad, parks its dark blue car with lights extinguished in some dark side street. Everywhere preparations are being made. The mouth of the Metro spews out another flood of night workers: waiters, flower-girls, bartenders, musicians, washers-up, chambermaids who work in the hundreds of little hotels whose rooms are not let for a night but for "*un moment*", or Arabs, Spaniards, Russians and Italians without definite occupation, but hoping for an opportunity, no matter what; spivishly dressed youths, each of whom has a number of girls he must keep an eye on and get money from; guides who have been dismissed from the travel agencies and are working on their own; artistes; people who hold the curtain; the women whose realm is the lavatory; confidence tricksters and pedlars of cocaine. Thereupon Montmartre lights the lamp which draws the foreigners and provincials to it like insects. Miles and miles of neon tubing light up in thousands of twirls and figures. The light is so strong that the shabby streets with their rickety façades, shabby doorways and broken gutters become ennobled. Over the place there comes an air of magnificence and splendour; the foreigner reacts like a moth to a candle, he cannot resist its attraction, and once inside the circle of light he is drawn to the resplendent entrances of the nightclubs like the fly to the shiny flypaper.

But surely the nightclubs have changed in appearance and type with the years? If they have, the changes are insignificant. Trumpets blare, and the tourist dances with a bar girl in a cheap gown on a dance floor lit from underneath. Saxophones wail and a troupe of shapely beauties with ostrich feathers in their hair and nothing anywhere else strut across the stage. Guitars twang and

a couple of Spanish dancers perform a tango. A piano tinkles and someone dressed in the clothes of the 'nineties sings one of the songs with which Aristide Bruant made a hit in the days of Montmartre's greatness, when Toulouse Lautrec sat in a corner and made sketches for a poster. Balalaikas strum and a Cossack comes leaping on to the stage with a sword in his mouth. Violins wail and pallid fiddlers try to impart their Central European sentimentality to the couples at the tables. Champagne corks pop, and exorbitant bills are studied with nervous glances. And the decorations? Eternally the same. White plaster-of-Paris goddesses peering with empty eyes from garish walls; walls painted to resemble logs and an imitation Wild West style with nothing but floor, walls and roof, a few tables and a little platform for a band. Places got up like miniature theatres or gloomy catacombs; like a café at Grinzing or an Atlantic steamer, all well-tried old ideas; places that are shabby and others that are elegant, others again that gleam and glitter with an obtrusive, exaggerated luxury like *nouveaux riches* determined to show how magnificent they are. Le Duc, where Blanchet performed the important functions of head-waiter, belonged to this latter category. It had few rivals in Paris and none in other capitals.

Personally I can't be bothered with the nightclubs of Montmartre. If you want to spend a pleasant or a gay evening in Paris there are so many other places, the truly Parisian, witty little cabarets where you don't have to pour doubtful champagne down your throat with the certainty of an appalling hangover the next day. But naturally I had been to Le Duc. It was one of the things you had to do, and besides there were always countrymen of mine visiting Paris whose French was only of the school variety, and who thus did not want to be bothered with it on an evening out. The interior of Le Duc was such that you halted in amazement in the doorway. A strange world of feudal luxury, all gold and silver and velvet, lay spread before your eyes. It was like suddenly

finding yourself in a castle where some crazy aristocrat had turned the family chapel into a combined banqueting hall and room for celebrating black masses. Because of Blanchet I knew its background and origins, so the place was all the more amazing. And how extraordinary it was, that history of a Paris nightclub!

Blanchet had been in on it from the very beginning. The owner was a man who had made a lot of money out of a café business on Champs Élysées and wanted to invest some of it in Montmartre night life. He set himself two seemingly contradictory objectives. His nightclub was to be made to look the acme of luxury and its equipment was to cost no more than a certain modest sum. They found a firm of shopfitters near Place Blanche and arranged for carpenters, masons and painters who erected walls, built offices, and generally were responsible for the shell itself, while the owner, his wife and Blanchet searched for the "luxury", a process which occupied several months. What they were after was pieces that looked expensive without being so, and what appears more expensive than old furniture, old paintings and sculptures? Monsieur le Patron's hunting ground was the Hôtel Drouot which he haunted from morning till night attending auction sales. Not the better kind to which the experts go, but the lesser auctions at which middle-class homes are sold up and the lots consist of several pieces. He managed to get hold of a number of chairs with carved backs, one or two tabourets which looked distinguished if you didn't study them too closely, and – this was a real find – piles of old curtains of dark red velvet. His wife took over the flea market and returned in triumph with armfuls of wooden sculptures, gilt angels and ornamental balcony rails, all in bad repair and correspondingly cheap. One day she arrived enthroned on an open lorry on three old-fashioned trunks stuffed with evil-smelling curtains of red velvet. They apparently came from some hotel which had been wound up. That was another find, for, as soon became obvious, red velvet was an article of the greatest

importance for the nightclub Le Duc. She also bought a considerable number of copies in oils of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century masters.

Blanchet was allotted a more specialized hunting ground, that of the undertakers'. Paris swarms with undertakers. It is difficult to understand how there can be enough corpses to keep them all going. Some of them in fact do have a thin time of it, and occasionally one goes bankrupt. Blanchet had a cousin in the business, and through him was able to obtain information about firms that were on the point of going down. His contribution to the equipment of Le Duc was not to be despised: pieces of black cloth embroidered with silver and gold, magnificent candelabra made of a metal having the appearance of silver, ornamental candles several feet tall, small prie-dieux. The three of them expended a lot of energy and resource, and the result was magnificent. Naturally there was a lot that they could not obtain on their own, and the owner had to fork out considerable sums. For example, there was the heavy red carpet and the diminutive dance floor, in the middle of which a ducal crown in dark wood had been let in so that it looked like marquetry. Each table was provided with a circular opening which was covered with reddish glass. When this was lit from underneath there appeared the aristocratic silhouette of a ducal crown. They had goblets made of some metal like silver, and these bore the ducal arms taken from some old *ex libris* they had found. All that, of course, cost money.

Its artistic arrangement took a couple of months. The velvet curtains were cut up and stretched across the walls and the ceiling was painted black. Electric fittings were put in the old funereal candelabra. The old paintings were hung up, and their frames given a coat of gold paint. Angels, sculptures, stools and prie-dieux were placed where they would show to the greatest advantage. In the hall an upholstered sedan chair was arranged as a telephone kiosk. A little altar – Blanchet's discovery – was

arranged as a stand for bouquets and button-holes mirroring themselves in an eighteenth-century pier glass, the frame of which had similarly been treated with gold paint. They put a pipe in a baptismal font and thus achieved an effective little fountain which provided a mental association with monastery gardens. Madame, whose home had been furnished by Galeries Barbes, was continually putting her head on one side and peering and stepping back like an interior decorator from Faubourg St. Honoré. They got hold of a couple of glass-fronted cabinets and put lighting in them and on the glass shelves placed china figures that could be taken for Dresden. A specialist in restaurant lighting was engaged to install the other light effects. Here the owner was prepared to pay properly. It was the lighting which was to provide the great illusion. So far the light had consisted of daylight which streamed in through a six-foot window in one wall (velvet-covered and invisible when the shutter was closed). The total effect was appalling; the shabbiness, patchiness and ricketiness of it all cried to high heaven. But when the lighting expert had finished, the window was shut again and Blanchet switched on the lights. It was a great moment. Concealed lamps emitted a faint, indirect light that enveloped the restaurant in a mysterious semi-twilight and made the false antiques, the indifferent oil paintings and faded velvet on the walls merge in a sort of morbid elegance. It all became genuine and substantial, rich and fanciful.

"Tears came into Madame's eyes when we turned the lights on for the first time," said Blanchet. "She had to pull herself together before she could say anything. '*Mon Dieu, comme c'est joli*,' she exclaimed."

However, there was still something lacking, and it was Blanchet who made the discovery. If you call a nightclub "Le Duc" and take a ducal crown as an ornament which appears on every table, on the dance floor and more or less everywhere, people would be justified in asking whom the Duke was. Naturally it was not neces-

sary to provide him with a fictitious name with a sonorous aristocratic sound, but he ought to be represented in a better way than just by his crown and arms.

"We had to get a portrait of the Duke," he explained. "It had to be large, it had to have a crown on the frame and hang above a table of honour like that long one there under the ventilator."

It was both a clever idea and the right one, and was greeted with the enthusiasm that was its due. An auction at a château in the Loire afforded an opportunity. The place had just changed hands and the new owner wanted to make room for his own furniture. Blanchet was sent to the auction with instructions to get several portraits so as to give them a choice. He returned with two anonymous figures from the end of the eighteenth century. The one was magnificent in silk and white wig and had a chest covered with orders. He was an impressive and very dignified man, and both Blanchet and the owner thought that he looked the more ducal of the two. But Madame considered his belly too protuberant, his age too great and the look in his eyes unpleasant. They decided on the other portrait. This represented a young gallant on a green lawn with a white temple in the background. He held a flower-entwined stick in one hand and a white three-cornered hat in the other. By the side of his high-heeled shoes reposed a coquettish lamb. His face was feminine, rosy-cheeked and expressionless.

"*Comme il est beau!*" sighed Madame.

So the unknown youth was hung on the shutter above the long table. (Each morning when the last customer had gone Blanchet would take him by his pink silk stocking and open the shutter to air the room.) The frame was treated with gold paint and surmounted with a magnificent ducal crown. A table-lamp shed a soft shimmer of light over the masterpiece. Le Duc had acquired its duke. The tables beside the anonymous aristocrat were reserved for those with very well-known names, for film stars and other

celebrities who were made to sign their names in a golden book that was kept in a glass showcase and opened at the best pages. The case was opened with a little golden key which Blanchet kept in his waistcoat pocket. When there was a celebrity present the orchestra would strike some solemn chords. Then there would be silence. Blanchet would walk across to the showcase with all the gravity of a high-priest. With a slow and dignified movement he would insert the golden key in the lock, open the case and bear the golden book to the celebrity's table on the palms of his outstretched hands. The celebrity would scribble his or her name, those at the neighbouring tables would applaud, and the little ceremony concluded with another chord from the orchestra. The watery blue eyes of the duke watched from the wall.

But I am anticipating. Le Duc was now ready as far as furnishings went. A *directeur artistique* was engaged who was to be responsible for the programme and who in his turn engaged a ballad-singer, a Spaniard who sang to the guitar, and a rhumba orchestra in South American costume. That, however, was merely the trimmings. The great attraction for which Le Duc was to become known and about which all Paris was to talk was *Le Grand Orchestre Ducal.* Perhaps it wasn't so very ducal, but you could not complain about its size: thirty members of whom twenty-five were fiddlers. It was conducted by a Czech violinist of real talent, who had passed out of the Prague Conservatoire with honours, a handsome chap who made the women guests whisper "Valentino" when he appeared in his well-cut tails. Like so many others he had been a victim of the pre-war over-production of musicians in that land of gifted musicians. Before the great conflagration even the meanest cafés near the Wenceslas Square used to provide wonderful music. Wherever you went you would hear violinists and pianists of amazingly high standard. The leader of the *Grand Orchestre* was one of the army of good musicians which had emigrated to Paris in the hope of win-

ning access to the concert platform. Like so many of his fellows he was forced to content himself with playing to people in restaurants and nightclubs. To be able to lead and recruit the orchestra for Le Duc at least gave him an economic opportunity. From the international musical proletariat of Paris he fished up Hungarians and Poles and Rumanians and, not least, his fellow-countrymen. He rehearsed a programme that included most of the well-known Viennese waltzes, popular romances, Italian serenades and Russian gipsy melodies. They played zigeuner-wise, without pauses and without music, as though it were all impromptu. A slight hinting phrase from his violin was enough to tell the others what the next piece was to be. But that was not enough. *Le Grand Orchestre* was also a peripatetic orchestra. The violinists wandered among the tables as they played, leaned over people's shoulders and poured their music straight into the customer's ears. *Le chef d'orchestre* would press his fiddle's neck against some lovely woman's cheek, catch her eye and thus set up a vibrant, hypnotic sensation in the object of his attention. At times he would give a slight signal and the orchestra would suddenly fall silent allowing his violin to play alone some melody in a minor key, redolent with the ecstatic melancholy in which Eastern Europe specializes. On such occasions he would be leaning over some guest of honour. As nightclub showmanship it was perfect. But as time went on he got an ear complex, Blanchet told me. Night out and night in he was forced to gaze into ears of all kinds: dirty ears, clean ears, protruding ears, close-fitting and wrinkled ears, cauliflower ears, pigs' ears and ears that weren't because an operation had removed them. However, in this life you never get anything for nothing and the man's unusual complaint was compensated by an excellent income. He earned most from tips. When he made his entry at the head of his twenty-five fiddlers all playing Mendelssohn's Bridal March there was always a thousand franc note stuck under the strings of his violin. That gave the

guests a hint of what was expected of them should the maestro come and bend over their table. Such tips were given with the utmost discretion and refinement. The guest thanked the maestro by shaking his hand and the handclasp served to transfer a note. When the time came to send in the rhumba band and let the violinists recuperate, the fiddlers assembled on the platform for *le grand finale*. The already feeble lighting was reduced to a single lamp which shed its soft light over the forest of bows and white hands. *Le chef* snapped his fingers three times, and Liszt's Fifth Hungarian Rhapsody burst forth like an acoustic cloudburst with such force that the duke leaped on his wall above the table of honour. You might imagine that the presence of that super-orchestra in so small a space would have resulted in protest and an empty room. It was as though the people sat in an orchestra pit. Their eardrums must have been tried to bursting point. Conversation was impossible. Nonetheless they looked fascinated, and when there was a few moments' calm the ladies gave sighs of satisfaction and exclaimed: *merveilleux!* Naturally there were occasions when some lover of music turned tail on the threshold and fled with a look of horror on his face, but they were few and far between. *Le Grand Orchestre Ducal* became a success, and it lasted.

During our conversations in Select (when it was by no means easy to get him off politics) Blanchet never tried to persuade me to visit Le Duc. There were no hints of very good tables and suchlike temptations which restaurant people usually hold out when a possible customer comes their way. That I finally did pay it a visit was due to two things. In the first place I wanted to see Blanchet in his strange nocturnal element. I realized that there he must be quite a different Blanchet to the rabid radical-socialist I met in Select. Then there was a tune I had forgotten. A year or two before I had had a job to do in the Austrian capital, which was still the ragged, pathetic, suffering Vienna of *The Third Man*.

When I had finished my work for the day, I used to pop into a bar near the Kärntnerstrasse for something to eat. It, too, had a gipsy orchestra, only (thank God) in miniature. Actually it merely comprised a violinist and a small obese 'cellist who always appeared drunk. But what a violinist! An old gipsy *primas* with brown, parchment-like skin stretched taut over a powerful bony face in which two eyes glowed like coals. He played with a gloomy passionateness that was captivating. When he felt in form, he could free popular songs of their banality in a way that bordered on genius. An acquaintance grew up between us because I happened to fall in love with his favourite tune. It was called the *Blaskowitz Waltz*, a charming and lovely bagatelle with those sudden switches from the major to the minor key that are so effective on gipsy violins. It was, he told me, a Hungarian tune that had a great success in Budapest around the turn of the century and had then been utterly forgotten. He used to come and sit at my table and play it for me every evening, until I found that it had become a necessity, as can happen with tunes. When I walked home to my hotel through the dark streets I hummed it over and over to myself in an attempt to retain the mood. The *Blaskowitz Waltz* seemed to me to give the atmosphere of mangled Vienna in which the reflection of a happy past could still occasionally be glimpsed and so help to keep one's disquiet over the present at bay. For me it became the tune of post-war Vienna in the same way as for me the *Warsaw Concerto* will always be London during the war.

On the evening when I was to leave Vienna and return to Paris I decided to stop at that bar on my way to the Nordbahnhof. For a variety of reasons I was late in starting and the taxi had only ten minutes in which to get me to the station, and three of those were sacrificed to the *Blaskowitz Waltz*. We roared through the streets and stopped outside the bar. The porter rushed for the old *primas* who came dashing out with his 'cellist. The waltz was

played on the steps. It was a mad and ridiculous thing to do. I have often nearly missed a train, but never so nearly as on that evening. I just managed to leap into the Alberg express, and by the time the porter had got my luggage in the train was already pulling out. But the *Blaskowitz Waltz* still rang in my ears. I whistled it so persistently that my companion in the upper bunk was eventually compelled to ask me, however politely, to stop. By the time I reached Paris it had gone from my head. On various occasions I tried to ask restaurant orchestras to play it, but nobody knew it. A cymbalist at a Hungarian place did manage to produce a couple of bars, and that brought it to life in my inner ear, but I still longed to hear it played by a violinist who could play it as it ought to be played.

Our conversations about life at Le Duc made me think of the Czech leader.

"It would not surprise me if Vogel knew your tune . . . I shall ask him," promised Blanchet with great eagerness. Vogel was the leader's name.

The next time we met, Blanchet brought me greetings from him. The leader of the *Grand Orchestre Ducal* had been dumbfounded by my enquiry. Not since he left Prague had he heard anyone mention the *Blaskowitz Waltz*. He knew the tune well and was very fond of it. He and a couple of his men would rehearse it, and if I liked to come to Le Duc one night just before they closed, which was usually about four o'clock, they would play it for me.

"The last few people have usually gone by half-past four," said Blanchet.

And that was how it happened. One evening when I was having to take a party of visiting Swedes on the traditional round of Parisian night life I took advantage of the opportunity, and leaving them in front of a plateful of onion soup in Chien Qui Fume drove up to Place Blanche. It was then only just after three, but I was nearly as much interested in Blanchet, the nightclub head-waiter,

as in the waltz, and I wanted to see him in action before the last of his customers had vanished. A doorman with as much gold braid as a Portuguese admiral flung open the door. The air in the little hall was heavy with the scent of flowers and perfume. A young beauty in a pink rococo gown relieved me of my hat. Another beauty in a light blue rococo gown put a rose in my buttonhole and whispered with a seductive smile, "Five hundred francs, Monsieur." A little page-boy with his tunic braided like a hussar's laid hold of the angel's head that served as handle on the door to the restaurant itself. He opened the door and bowed.

A torrent of sound poured forth. It was as though a loud-speaker had suddenly been turned up to its absolute maximum. The orchestra was playing *The Blue Danube* . . . The faintness of the lighting made it impossible to see anything but the glitter of champagne buckets on the tables and the clouds of smoke clambering up the velvet walls and twining round the gilded frames of the oil paintings. Waiters and musicians floated among the tables like shades in Hades. Presumably the place was reasonably full. My eyes could only make out a few faces, one or two couples in full evening dress, two American officers, a dozen or so men and women in ordinary clothes. A couple of berets on two girls' flaxen heads and close beside them a coiffure that could have been the work of the master Antoine himself. It was the curiously mixed public that is so characteristic of Montmartre during the tourist season. A shadowy figure appeared, laid a light hand on my arm and led me to an empty table. It was Blanchet. He said something, evidently something very friendly, but I couldn't hear a thing. *The Blue Danube* monopolized all sound. A waiter opened a bottle of champagne, and judging by the gush of foam there must have been a loud pop, but *The Blue Danube* drowned even that. Two shades armed with violins came and bent over me, one by my right ear, the other by my left, where they acted as amplifiers in case I should be missing the music. I closed my eyes and

told myself that this was the trumpets and the walls of Jericho. I raised the goblet with ducal arms to my lips and discovered that the champagne tasted of tin. Then, however, the orchestra assembled on the platform for the Liszt rhapsody, after which it took a well-earned rest. The rhumba band took its place, and wonderful to relate its music sounded soft and restful by comparison. The lights were turned up a shade and it was possible to look around you. Above all I was enabled to observe Blanchet.

In his impeccable tail coat and with his wonderful carriage he cut a magnificent figure and provided the only aristocratic element in that parody of *noblesse*. He displayed a dignified courtesy that would have suited an earl. He sailed between the tables with a *grandezza* that made his customers appear upstarts and proletarian. He directed his subordinates with virtuosity. A look or a discreet gesture was enough to send a waiter hurrying to a certain table. Anyway the service was overwhelming. Two or three waiters had been allotted to each table and displayed an amazing ingenuity in finding things to do. You made as though to tap the ash off your cigarette and a hand was already there moving the ashtray towards you so that you didn't need to stretch out your hand; you raised an unlighted cigarette to your mouth, there was a lighter flaring in front of your nose. Personally I loathe being waited on to that extent, but it was in keeping with the place, and, judging by what I saw, impressed the customers. People seemed to find it princely. In actual fact it was proof of far more consideration for the owner's pocket than the well-being of his clients. Behind that mask of slavish politeness was a fierce determination that there should be no pause in consumption. As soon as someone took a sip of champagne his bottle was whipped from the ice-pail and the glass filled up. The bottle was emptied at express speed, and it wasn't even full to begin with. The champagne was tepid when it came in and shaken up, so that a good deal of the contents foamed out. Hands were always quick to set on the table yet another plate

of the cashews and almonds at which you nibble automatically, but which leave such unpleasant traces on the bill. If anyone should be disturbed by the mysterious ability of his champagne to vanish, and wished to insert a cup of coffee between bottles in order to economize, they were only too glad to serve him. An Arab in Eastern costume decanted a pitch-black fluid into a mocca cup of minute dimensions. Its contents cost as much as a glass of the best brandy in a good restaurant. Blanchet watched with eagle eye that no opportunity was let slip. At the table next to mine sat a young English couple, presumably on their honeymoon. When the first notes of Liszt's rhapsody sounded the girl gave a deep sigh of happiness. Blanchet noticed it, raised two fingers in the air and at once there was the flower-girl with her basket on her arm. A bouquet of roses was held out towards the English girl who took it with a dreamy look in her eyes while her swain began burrowing in his pocket. As a salesman Blanchet was a phenomenon. He not only sold everything that he had to sell, but some of his goods he sold twice. Before *Le Grand Orchestre* disappeared it played *Ach Värmeland Du Sköna* for a company of Swedes who, judging by their expressions, seemed to find the tune the high spot of their Parisian adventure. Again Blanchet raised two fingers and hey presto! there was the flower-girl with her basket. She smiled an entrancing smile and murmured a few words in English: "In case Monsieur would like to thank the band leader." A bouquet made its way to the leader who bowed and smiled a white toothy smile, and passed the bouquet to a waiter who disappeared with it through a door. I happened to notice that one of the roses had a broken stalk and drooped. Half an hour later I noticed an obese and elderly man handing a bouquet of roses to the young beauty at his side. One of the roses had a broken stalk and was drooping. It seemed to me that Blanchet had missed his vocation. He ought to have been in a really large concern selling refrigerators or washing machines at a huge profit. Merely the way in which he

adjusted his expression to the type of customer was a thing of genius. When at the English couple's table his face had just that thoroughly honest and respectful expression that the British like to see on a head-waiter's face, at the Swedish table he was very slightly hail-fellow-well-met, and the two American officers melted like wax when with well-feigned interest he studied the photographs of the members of their families which Americans apparently must exhibit if they are to live.

The hours passed. The *Grand Orchestre* appeared and disappeared again. People began to go. There were fewer and fewer waiters. I was all but alone in that luxurious world of gold and silver and velvet.

"Vogel will be here in a few minutes," said Blanchet. The leader came in followed by two of his fiddlers. They placed their violin cases and overcoats on the table next to mine.

"Herr Vogel," said Blanchet introducing the leader, and his use of the title Herr was a hint that the leader had not got on too well with French and preferred to speak German.

Then the three of them struck up the *Blaskowitz Waltz*. Their playing was soft and civilized and without any cheap effects. I closed my eyes and felt myself wafted to Vienna on that river of bland sound. I suddenly remembered Bruce Lockhart, who in one of his books which I read before the war, related how gipsy music once became a real vice with him and undermined his finances, how he had been unable to resist it. He had to have his certain quantity of gipsy music every evening. It became like the hypodermic of the morphia addict. I remember that, when I read it, it had seemed to me an incomprehensible sentimentality, and during the war, when I happened to be at the same lunch and found myself sitting facing a down-to-earth and apparently thorough-going realist, those orgies of emotion appeared even more puzzling. Now, as I listened to those three violins, I began to understand.

"It is a long time since I played this tune," said Herr Vogel.

"1928 in the Sekt Pavilion in Prague. It is a forgotten waltz we bring to life again."

They played it one last time and then packed their violins away and picked up their coats. I offered to drive *le maître* home.

"I live only ten minutes' walk away. I don't dare do without that walk. After a night at Le Duc you need to breathe."

Blanchet leant over the table smiling an apologetic smile. "I'm afraid it's the end. I must lock up."

"I will drive you home."

"*Vous êtes trop aimable*. I must just air the place, I'll be ready almost at once."

He stretched across the table of honour and jerked the shutter open. It was an assault. In streamed the ruthless morning sunlight. It spared no one and nothing. The oil paintings cried out their cheapness; the velvet on the walls looked spotted and revolting; cigarette ash lay in drifts on the floor and rust peeped out from the joints of the ice-buckets. The sweet little flower-girl had become ten years older and looked like a raddled actress. On the wall facing me hung a mirror in a gilt plaster-of-Paris frame trying to look like carved wood. The brutal sunlight shone its way straight into the mirror and showed a pale face with a horrified expression in its eyes. It was myself.

Herr Vogel noticed my reaction.

"*Verfluchte Wirklichkeit*," said he with a grin and disappeared through the door.

This accursed reality accompanied us as the car slid down the slopes of Montmartre. "Entertainment" ends with the daylight, leaving the ugliness of shut doors, extinguished neon lights. The sky was lovely with the dawn, yet beneath it were the fronts of houses streaked with damp, grey shutters, rusty chimney-pipes peering out from window panes, and clothes-lines stretched between windows. Strange slum figures passed on their way back to their holes in the narrow alleys from heaven knows what

activities. Men, their ashen faces half hidden by turned-up coat collars, hurried silently in different directions. Two street-walkers drinking their morning coffee at a still open *bistro* no longer even bothered to send the passers-by a look of promise or enticement. A policeman was standing half asleep in a doorway, and a forgotten tourist was buying aspirin in the little chemist's shop which never shuts. A couple of workmen bicycled past, lunch-boxes on their carriers, going to some early job in a distant quarter. The water to cleanse the streets was just gushing out from the wide openings in the edge of the pavement and sweeping paper and refuse away.

"Do you know what the name Montmartre means?"

"It's strange how much better foreigners seem to know the city than Parisians themselves," said Blanchet.

"Mons Martyrum," said I. "The hill of the martyrs."

"That would just about suit it today."

"Wouldn't it? The fleeced tourist, the prostitute, the night-club employee . . ."

"Obviously you can be a martyr without knowing it," said Blanchet. "Would you be kind enough to stop for a moment."

Blanchet walked across to a newspaper crone who was just taking up her stance outside Trinité church and returned with a copy of the radical-socialist *Aurore* under his arm.

"My morning reading."

At Rue Rivoli we had to wait till a thundering caravan of empty vegetable lorries from Les Halles had rumbled past. In the garden of the Tuileries dew was glittering on the lawns, and from Quai du Louvre we could see the morning mist sailing down the waters of the Seine. I put Blanchet down at Henri IV's statue on Pont Neuf.

"I hope you are satisfied with your evening?"

"Much more than satisfied, Monsieur Blanchet."

Dr. Jekyll swallowed a magic potion to change himself into

Mr. Hyde. *Aurore* seemed to have the same effect on Blanchet, for it was not the unscrupulous tourist-hunter who then disappeared in the direction of Place Dauphine eagerly studying the headlines, but a radical-socialist reformer in whose breast burned the flame of conviction. He halted for an instant, muttered something excitedly and made a gesture of protest with one arm, and it seemed to me that he said:

"These damned socialists! *Cochons!*"

The quays of the Left Bank were deserted, their parapets were painted green by the locked cases of the second-hand booksellers. I was able to put on speed. In front of the National Assembly at Concorde Bridge a couple of weary policemen were sauntering up and down. They were just shutting the gates. Another all-night sitting! It struck me that it wasn't only the nightclub workers, street girls, burglars and the porters of Les Halles whom one must include among the city's nocturnal workers, but also the deputies, and they might even have pride of place. In England, or Sweden, the Lower House is an institution where members daily devote themselves in calm, or relative calm, to attending to the affairs of the nation. The National Assembly, however, is the focal point of France. It provides – and this is not meant in a derogatory sense – a stage on which comedies, dramas and tragedies are continually taking each other's place. A Swedish member of parliament is usually a composed and assured person to whom explosions of temperament are foreign. *Monsieur le député* bears a volcano in his breast. He lives in a world which has surprisingly few connections with the rest of the French world. On receiving his mandate the deputy says farewell to that civilized rhythm of life which makes his country such a pleasant one, and steps into a world which in bustle, nervous strain and continual tension has no equal. When he leaves his little provincial town, he is the emigrant setting out for the land of great

possibilities. It is often said that the House of Commons is a pretty good mirror of the aspect of England; if that were true of the National Assembly, then France would be a huge witches' cauldron which seethes and bubbles and frequently boils over.

Foreigners are always surprised at the attention lavished upon the deputies. They are celebrities. Popular imagination equips them with a power which in reality they do not possess. Nevertheless, countless people seem to harbour the illusion that if you could only acquire good connections with a member of the National Assembly then most of life's problems would be alleviated. The State furnishes the elected representatives of the people with three outward signs of their importance. The newly elected deputy receives a tri-coloured ribbon of silk which is worn round the neck on solemn occasions; he gets a gay badge, like an order, to put in his buttonhole; and he is allotted a special deputy's medal. With this impressive piece goes a small round metal disc coloured red, white and blue; this he fastens to his windscreen and thereby becomes a person privileged in the eyes of police and as regards traffic signals and parking places. If he does not own a car and feels that he cannot afford one, he is entitled to use one or other of the twenty-four cars held at the disposal of the deputies. The National Assembly helps him to get a flat for a reasonable price. Where the telephone is concerned, he must only pay the rent of the instrument, the Assembly answers for all local calls, which is a valuable concession in Paris where no free calls are given. And, last but not least, he gets a salary of some £100 a month with good prospects of getting more from special commissions. All this helps to create the illusion that *Monsieur le député* is a very important person. I once made the acquaintance of the apothecary of a small country town who enjoyed great local respect due entirely to the fact of his being a good friend of a *député*.

When the new member for the first time mounts the steps of the pompous rostrum of the Assembly, his heart quivers with

expectancy. He knows that those steps can lead to Hôtel Matignon where the head of the government resides or, why not? to the Élysée Palace. He embarks upon a vortex of political lunches and dinners. He paces the corridors, nodding here and making connections there. It is an atmosphere that "gets under your skin". On the nights when there is no sitting he works at some bill through which he hopes to win sudden honour and fame, for it is possible to do that in the world of French politics. And he works, too, at the speech with which he is to launch his bill. Can he but find some scintillating phrase, it will go a good way towards victory and acceptance. Gambetta achieved the feat of overthrowing a government with five little words: "*se soumettre ou se demettre*". The inspiration is what matters. Above all, however, the deputy must work, that is to say he must be "in on things". I know of no one so industrious as the French politician. He doesn't allow himself five minutes' rest. In other countries when lights are on in ministries' windows until late in the night, you know that trouble is brewing. In Paris that is a daily occurrence. And as far as the National Assembly is concerned, when there is a *grand séance* the building is ablaze until five o'clock in the morning. There are black queues outside the entrances, and people wait for hours on end for a place in the public gallery.

The gate opened once more for a deputy leaving late, a small round figure with a brief-case clasped to his chest. He turned off in the direction of Boulevard St. Germain. I recognized him. Before he disappeared within the magic circle of politics he used to be the energetic mayor of a small town in central France. I recognized him for the simple reason that he lived in the same building as I. His flat was directly opposite mine on the other side of the courtyard. For a long time I had thought it unoccupied, for there were never any lights in the windows and we saw no signs of life.

"It's certainly not empty," said Simon, the concierge. "*Monsieur*

*le député* lives there, only he seldom has the time to be at home. But anyway there he is."

Out through the gateway had flitted a stocky fat little man with a brief-case under his arm. He went almost at a run as though the asphalt of the pavement were burning his feet. The Metro at Solferino had just spewed out a stream of people and he hurried through them, zig-zagging like someone hastening through a wood. The tone in which he ejaculated his "Pardon, Madame!" and "Pardon, Monsieur!" was coloured with that remote politeness of a person conscious of not being as others are, and of belonging, unlike them, to a world which means something. There was not much to be got from his face: a black moustache beneath a shapeless nose, a double chin and the beginnings of a third. You might, perhaps, have said that it was characterized by a sort of fleshy authority. His brief-case bulged with papers.

"In the olden days people carried their marshal's batons in their knapsacks," said Simon, who has his moments. "Now they keep them in brief-cases."

"He's putting forward a proposal for increasing war widows' pensions. That will be some time tonight, for he's well down the list of speakers. I've got a ticket for the gallery," added Simon in a tone of that intense satisfaction which only a French concierge could feel at such a gift.

I felt convinced that *Monsieur le député* would present the war widows' case in such a way as to make many eyes wet and elicit many "Ohs" and "Ahs" from the gallery. That bulging brief-case was stuffed with pathos like a balloon with gas. Some time in the small hours it would be made to explode. The little politician would undoubtedly be carried away in his own flood of sentiment. The National Assembly would be confronted, as it were, with a war widow personally proclaiming her distress from the rostrum. You would hear excited agreement from the benches and the speaker would ring his ship's bell and cry, "*Faîtes silence,*

*Messieurs.*" Perhaps the proposal would survive the voting and the war widows be given a few extra francs a month. And, that done, in all probability they would be expunged from the mind of their benefactor – which would be thoroughly characteristic of French parliamentary life. The deputies can work themselves up over a bill to an extent that bears no relation whatever to its real importance. They struggle and wrestle, suffer and are racked. They expend as much energy as though the weal of the entire nation were at stake. To the foreigner it often appears as though they were fighting for the sake of fighting. When the battle is won, interest can subside as suddenly as an electric light being switched off. The reform which has just been forced through can now look after itself. By becoming fact it has also become trivial. The protector of war widows withdraws to his workshop, there to employ the quiet hours of dawn in preparing another firework.

Apropos Simon the concierge – another night worker. Paris clings to the absurd system of having concierges, which, by refusing tenants keys, is tantamount to holding them incapacitated. People talk of the time-recording machine as a modern invention, but the idea has been used in Paris for centuries. The concierge records the goings and comings of the tenants. At regular intervals there is an agitation in the Press to do away with the system. There are three forces opposed to this being done: the concierges who, though they are woken up in the middle of the night, enjoy their power, the postmen who are saved having to climb all the stairs because all post is handed in at the concierge's lodge, and the police who employ the tyrants as informants.

I pulled the brass handle which communicates a signal to Simon's poky abode. No result. I pulled it again. The door opened slightly with a creak of protest. The curtain at the glass door of the concierge's lodge was moved aside and I saw Simon's suspicious and irritated face and a patch of his nightshirt. The mouth formed to utter what, judging by the man's expression,

might well have been the words: "Five in the morning. Bloody foreigners!"

"Bonsoir, Monsieur Simon!" I called and smiled.

His door opened a couple of reluctant millimetres, just sufficient to let out a terse and ironical

"Bonjour, Monsieur!"

## 4

September proved an enchanting month and one lovely day I went to the bathing place by the Concorde Bridge for a dip in the Seine. "Bain de Ligny" had been crowded all that wonderful summer, despite the fact that the Frenchman in general is not much of a swimmer. That is probably because France as a whole is a country without lakes. I admired the few bathers who persisted in trying to acquire the art of swimming. The possibility of making oneself ridiculous lays an icy chill upon the hearts of most Scandinavians and Britishers, but the French are free of any such complex. The pupils at Bain de Ligny were mostly middle-aged women who employed the instructor there, an elderly, fat man wearing an inscription "*Maître Nageur*" on his white sweater.

The instructor's victim had a belt tied round him, or mostly her, to which was attached a long rope. This was fastened to a thing like a bowsprit jutting over the edge of the pool. The victim adopted a horizontal position in the water and began to execute what she thought were the correct movements, while the *Maître Nageur* seated himself on a stool with a megaphone in his left hand and a long stick in the right. Through the megaphone he shouted his orders at his victim and with the stick smacked those parts of the body which were not in the correct attitude.

"Madame, your feet under water!"

Smack.

"*Madame, baissez les fesses!*"

Smack.

"*Nom de Dieu, baissez les fesses!*"

Smack. Smack.

At the end of the lesson the victim, usually some wretched

middle-aged woman, would crawl out with wet wisps of hair straggling out from under her bathing-cap and far too agitated to remember to hold her stomach in. The *Maître Nageur*, however, would bow most courteously and kiss his victim's hand. It was really charming.

On this particular morning the victim was an enormous woman and the lesson was her first. Her bulges spoke of a certain weakness for "*la bonne chère*"; not the least of her weight appeared to have been concentrated in that part intended by nature to be sat upon. When the *Maître Nageur* repeated his command: "*Mais, Madame, baissez donc les fesses!*" it was obvious that were she to do so properly, she must swim under water. As she lay in the water splashing and struggling a keeper came running up with a paper which, jabbering excitedly, he placed on the swimming instructor's knees. The *Maître Nageur* laid megaphone and stick aside, read the headlines, rose from his stool and began a lively discussion with the cashier and the lady in charge of the towels. A minute or two later he was in the bar in earnest converse with a waiter. His pupil began to shriek and had to be hauled up and helped on to *terra firma* by the bathers. Her instructor was then talking excitedly with two of the dressing-room cleaners. By now, however, the news had spread: bus and metro strike! The unions concerned had called a *grève surprise* to take place immediately, and according to the newspaper, there were only very few lines still running, and it was expected that these would stop during the afternoon.

A transport strike in a city of the size of Paris is a serious matter. This was a proper one, for once well organized and complete. By the seventh day the aspect of the streets had changed completely, and the strike was by no means without its effect even on Café Select. Durand, who at seven each morning usually went with his baskets and string bags to Les Halles and back again by bus, now had to start out at five with a wheelbarrow. Blanchet,

who again was forced to go home from Montmartre on foot, raged worse than ever against the dark powers whom he thought to have detected behind the strike. A new central figure had now arisen among the clientele of Select, the grey-complexioned ticket-inspector on the Metro who always bought his cigarettes from Colette. The strike had turned him into one-in-the-know and a person of importance. Whether it was a precautionary measure on his part or not, there is no knowing, but he condemned the strike in no uncertain terms and prophesied fiasco for it. For him personally it must have been an expensive strike. The unaccustomed joy of being the centre of interest made him spend the greater part of his day at the bar, where he gathered a little court of the curious round him and converted his strike pay into beer.

"Not that I am pretending to know *everything*," said he, giving his glass a long and thoughtful look, as though it had been a crystal, "but it looks as though a dozen trains ought to start running from tomorrow."

"A dozen!" exclaimed Blanchet. "A dozen trains in a metro system that usually carries five million passengers a day!"

"Will it be between Pont de Sèvres and Montreuil?" wondered an official of the Prefecture whose personal transport problem was linked with that line.

"If you guess Vincennes–Neuilly you should be near the truth," said the ticket-inspector.

"Just what I might have expected," said Blanchet. "Not a single coach on my line!"

"Nor on mine," said the man from the Prefecture.

The door opened and another victim of the strike walked in, Pitou, the professional middleman, the go-between who arranged everything.

"Vincennes–Neuilly! Did you say Vincennes–Neuilly?"

"I said that there was a prospect of a small number of trains starting to run on that line."

The ticket-inspector liked using careful phraseology. It gave an impression of reliability.

Pitou gave a sigh of relief and disappeared into the telephone box.

"Actually a shady character," said the ticket-inspector.

"Now that there's everything to be had in the shops, people like Pitou ought to be out of work. Instead they flourish, living on the excessive greed of the retailer. It's the business man's greed we have to fight, that's why things are so dear."

I saw Durand grow red in the face. The proprietor of Select was the only representative of free enterprise present. His honour was touched.

"It takes a wage-earner to produce that argument!" he exclaimed. "People who don't understand more of business than Pitou does of bicycling. Why do you not say something about the impoverishment of business by the State. Isn't there such a thing as taxes? Why don't you mention the constant rises in wages that are making all normal calculation impossible?"

"Of course, I don't know what wages you pay Madame Durand and Mademoiselle Colette," said the man from the Prefecture with an ironic smile.

"Your naïvety is almost embarrassing! Do you really think that my wife would have to stand in the kitchen and my daughter in the tobacco kiosk if I could get people for a reasonable wage?"

"I don't think anything. But you all say that about taxes and wages, from big directors to café proprietors, you all trot out the same argument. And how can one ever discuss that side of the problem when you can never find out a business man's true income?"

"There happens to be a thing called Declaration of Income. Like all my fellow citizens, I make such a declaration. Go and ask the tax people."

"Have you declared that bundle of dollar bills stuffed away in

your mattress? And the gold coins in the commode? And the Swiss francs . . .?"

"*Assez!*"

Durand was purple in the face.

"Just a little joke, Monsieur Durand."

"It goes against the grain to speak in this manner to a *client*, but after what has passed I can see no other possibility: *Communist!*"

"I am very far from being a Communist," said the man from the Prefecture.

"I said Communist, and I stand by that."

"If you absolutely must know, then I vote for the Popular Republicans. But your attack is typical. For us French everything is politics. It's as though politics were the explanation for everything: high prices, housing shortage, bankruptcy. If you should happen to serve smaller steaks than usual, I suppose we ought to see politics even in that. We breathe, eat and drink politics. It almost seems that we are so steeped in politics that we are no longer capable of analysing a problem objectively."

His voice grew solemn.

"What we need is a new kind of strike –"

"As though we don't have enough strikes!"

"What we need is a non-political consumers' strike. A general strike of the buying public." His voice acquired a lighter note. "But let us restore peace with a drink: two Cinzanos!"

Durand did not reply, but he went and fetched a bottle and two glasses which he filled. Then he suddenly burst out laughing:

"I'll gladly drink with you. But on one condition: we drink to my victory."

"Your victory?"

"Did you not say just now that the public ought to go on strike and force business people to the wall? And in the same breath you

buy two Cinzanos off Select's profiteering proprietor! *Monsieur, vous êtes battu!*"

By sheer chance I got to know the ticket-inspector quite well. Nothing brings people closer together than indignation shared, and it was the French matches which really cemented our acquaintance. The State match monopoly which hides behind the letters S.E.I.T.A. manufactures a variety of kinds. Some are called *suédoises* and, perhaps out of politeness to my country, are of reasonable quality, but they are always difficult to get. Colette seldom had any, and the customers of Select usually had to content themselves with a green box called *Casque d'Or* containing a match of great capriciousness. If there were no *Casque d'Or* you had to make do with a booklet match which the imaginative monopoly had christened *Chamois*. On the flap was the picture of a goat standing on the top of an alp, though what such matches had in common with a chamois it is difficult to see. When not even these were obtainable, as happened every other week, we poor smokers were reduced to household matches in a box so huge that it would fit into no pocket.

One day when the transport strike was over, the ticket-inspector, reduced to his former insignificance, was standing forlornly by the bar when I came in. I offered him a cigarette and took one myself. We then began the usual smokers' race to see who can give the other a light. The ticket-inspector was quicker than I and produced a box of *Casque d'Or*. The match sputtered like a miniature roman candle and the ticket-inspector's right index finger took the place of the cigarette in his mouth:

"Bloody monopoly!" said he.

"Allow me," said I, turning back the cover of my *Chamois* and taking one out. I had not mastered the technique in those days and the whole lot exploded in my hand. It was my left thumb which suffered most, and so there was I, too, with a finger in my mouth.

Durand came hurrying up with a case of household matches:

"These are safer," said he, producing a large stick which he struck with a powerful sweep of his arm and lit our cigarettes.

The ticket-inspector was of that not uncommon type for whom the world outside his job is a vague thing of little interest, something bordering on the pointless. For him almost nothing mattered but what lay beneath street level. He spoke of Select in rather the same way as might a seaman who had temporarily left his natural element to make an incursion into some harbour café, but his eyes lit up whenever we came to speak of the Metro.

"You wouldn't believe all that goes on down there," he said.

After listening to him you got the impression that it was a sheer miracle that the ground hadn't given way and all Paris collapsed into a tremendous pit. The ground beneath the capital was like a worm-eaten apple. First, there were *les carrières*. Ever since Roman times and up to the end of the nineteenth century Paris supplied its own building material. When buildings are put up in other cities and towns it is usual for the stone to be brought long distances and with considerable expense and trouble. But not so Paris. Paris is a city that has grown up on seven hills. Those seven hills are made of the easily worked limestone with which the houses are built. The stone for them was quarried within the bounds and confines of the city itself. Down the centuries people have burrowed and blasted in all directions, and the shafts and galleries twist and turn for mile upon mile. As in a mine they pass over and under each other on different levels. This is especially true of the older central parts of the city. Gradually it was realized that Paris was in the course of consuming itself, that if they continued to bring the stone up to the surface and build it into great blocks, there was a risk that the city would be left poised over an empty space. As it was, it rested on a sieve. Quarrying was forbidden, but by then the problem was already so serious that the government found it necessary to set up a special authority to

keep an eye on the galleries. That authority still functions, and today no one can build a house in old Paris or even undertake extensive alterations without first consulting *Inspection Générale des Carrières de la Seine*. Maps have to be studied and experts go on expeditions in the shafts and galleries under the plot concerned, making their way roped together and with lanterns in their hands. It is very possible that the answer to an application will be "no". There have been innumerable proposals for the economic exploitation of these miles of tunnels, many of which remain unexplored. The only stretch which has yet been put to any use is a mile or so beneath Denfert-Rochereau, where a couple of million skeletons dug up from the various churchyards have been piled along the walls in a macabre pattern. Tourists are allowed to shiver at the sight of them on payment of the prescribed entrance fee.

"The authorities have no imagination," said the ticket-inspector. "Do we not live in the age of the atom bomb? Paris has at its disposal catacombs without equal anywhere in the world. We ought to turn them into shelters. There would be room enough for the entire population of the city."

The thought of driving five million people into a collective shelter-inferno seemed to afford this troglodyte considerable satisfaction.

"And there would be space over, too. Think of the sewers."

I thought of the sewers. I also thought of that wonderful film *The Third Man* with its impressive glimpse of the bridges and waterfalls of the sewers of Vienna.

"Vienna has the better of it there."

"Vienna!" he snorted. "We have one thousand four hundred kilometres of sewers. And what sewers! Some of them are as large as canals. You can sail a boat on them or use the little railway that follows the water-line. Haussmann was a chap who knew what he wanted."

Haussmann, he explained, had accomplished a great deal in

Paris. You only had to think of the boulevards and the big open *places*, or the mere fact that he gave the city light and air. But it was in fashioning the bowels of the city that his genius had come into its own. Before Haussmann's day all outflow was into the Seine. All filth and refuse was carried into the river which in summer used to stink like a latrine. Haussmann put an end to that insanitary state of affairs. He had a gigantic system of sewers built which took all refuse and sewage via subterranean tunnels into the surrounding country where it was made to serve as manure. The Third Republic continued his work, and Paris's sewage system, as it now is, should be regarded as one of the wonders of the world, so thought the ticket-inspector. And was it not, besides, a considerable tourist-attraction? Could you not almost any time see long files of foreigners with handkerchiefs to their noses and curiosity on their faces disappearing into the entrance in Place de la Concorde? Had not the sewers of Paris been already immortalized in the world-famous film *Phantom of the Opera*?

"Whom do you think we have to thank for the fact that all Paris and district is a flourishing garden? Haussmann!"

And that was not all. Along the walls of the sewers ran the pipes that supplied the city with drinking water. There ran the telephone and telegraph wires; to them were affixed the tubes with compressed air which sent *les pneumatiques* hastening on their way. It was some time at the end of the last century that Paris introduced a system of sending express letters which was unique. It still is and will remain so, for it is more curious than effective. It keeps going because the telephone system is not well developed and because it has a certain superiority over the telegram in that messages do not need to be couched in impersonal laconicisms. Lovers are its chief customers.

A youth wishes a rendezvous. The object of his affections has no telephone, an ordinary letter would not reach her till the following day and a telegram would not permit the verbose and

charming phrases a young Parisian girl considers herself entitled to expect. He writes a letter, takes it to a post office and pays a special fee. The letter is placed in a metal tube and this is inserted into a hole in the wall. Like a trained rat with a love letter in its mouth the tube dashes along the evil-smelling sewers to that part of the city where the young lady dwells. It is a unique system and would be most useful if the tubes did not have such a tendency to get stuck on the way or to dive into the wrong pipe and go to Passy when they should have gone to Bastile. The ticket-inspector, however, thought it was superb.

"You see yourself, Monsieur! Dirty water and pure water, telephone conversations of all kinds, important telegrams, ardent messages of love, all travel underground."

"You make the best of the gigantic rat-cage in which your profession compells you to live," said I, "and as far as love is concerned, you are wrong. No matter how many ardent *pneumatiques* the tube-post may carry, it is the first step that counts. And where is acquaintance made, the first spark kindled? Above ground, Monsieur, above ground."

"Have you a car, Monsieur?"

"Yes," said I. "But what has that to do with it?"

"I thought so. People with cars never know anything about the Metro. A large part of all marriages in Paris are the result of acquaintances made in the Metro."

He was right in a way. My knowledge of the Metro was confined to the short periods when my car was in dock. And anyway I loathed the Turkish bath atmosphere of the stations. However, even if I had been a zealous traveller on the Metro I should scarcely have seen it with the eyes of a ticket-inspector. For him it was a matter of a daily adventure which gave life its meaning. The pipes of the *pneumatique* might be filled with compressed air, but the tunnels of the Metro were stuffed with romance and drama, excitement and surprise. What was love above ground compared

with what you could experience in the Metro! The colourful advertisements for aperitifs transformed the stations into magic landscapes, ideal meeting-places for poor lovers because they gave protection from wind and rain and also kept them warm. The station Strassbourg-Saint Denis was a warren of dark tunnels and deep niches which should inject courage into even the shyest youth. Where could you better catch a pretty girl's eye than in a rattling metro carriage? Where could you have better conversational openings than in a crammed compartment when you suddenly found yourself jammed up against some beautiful unknown?

"There's the same driver on each one of those five hundred trains," he said with a laugh. "Eros!"

"A remarkable feat of split personality," I remarked, but the ticket-inspector was not to be side-tracked.

"It was at Bienvenue that I first met my wife. I caught her out in a *contravention*, travelling first on a second-class ticket." He grinned. "She got her punishment."

Then we passed from romance to drama. The trains do not go as fast as would appear, but fast enough from the suicide's point of view. Suicides are the constant bugbear of the Metro workers. When the woman who clips the tickets notices a traveller with a desperate or overwrought expression, she sees that he is kept under observation; even so, some thirty people a year succeed in committing suicide and not in the stations where the traffic is least, but where there are most people. Evidently suicides want their public. And you would expect too that the touch of the contact rail would mean instant death, but it doesn't. There is only six hundred volts in the rail, and that is not even enough to kill a dog.

Do they get dogs in the Metro? At times, yes. Passengers are not allowed to take them, but sometimes a dog comes in on its own, dashes hither and thither among the forest of legs, gets frightened by the thundering trains and hides in some niche. At

night, when all is quiet in the station and the trains have stopped, the dog emerges and goes off on its wanderings. The night patrol attends to it. These night patrols include dog-specialists. They have leather gloves with great cuffs and a lasso which they use with all the skill of a cowboy. If a dog touches the live rail it usually goes mad and its bite becomes dangerous. The specialist follows it down the dusky tunnels, catches it with his lasso and holds it with his gloved hands.

It is, in fact, at night that the real adventure of the Metro begins. It acquires a different, mysterious life. By day the trains run at fifteen to twenty miles an hour; by night ghost expresses rush along in different directions at nearly fifty. The Metro resounds with ear-splitting thunder. Trains with bulging containers like retorts squirt antiseptic liquid over platforms and track. Five green carriages pull into Nation, the automatic doors slide open and out streams an army of men in blue smocks with brooms and brushes.

The night patrols also have man-hunts. Every day about ten people get shut in by mistake when the exits and entrances close. Frightened, they wander about in a labyrinth in which locked grills and doors force them in different directions. Then the underground also has its underworld, the beggars and the peddling gentry. Begging is forbidden, yet from the beggar's point of view the Metro is a goldmine yielding a return of up to 1000 francs an hour. The work is organized. If the Metro staff try to remove a begging cripple, all the others come to his help. From passages, cubby-holes and corridors the blind, the amputated, the deformed come running, brandishing sticks and crutches, menacing and inciting the bystanders against the inhuman official. Some of the beggars stay behind when the gates are closed. The day's takings make a coup always worth trying. The night patrols search out these bandits. To avoid risk the heavy cash-boxes, *les boîtes à finances*, are fetched by men armed with machine-pistols.

"If you think of Paris as a living being," said the ticket-inspector, "the Metro represents the blood system. The five million passengers are the corpuscles hurrying through the veins. The rattle of the rail-joints is the pulse – which quickens at midday and quietens in the evening."

"How many years have you worked in the Metro?"

"It will be twenty next year."

We drank to each other and I turned to leave.

He called after me as I stood in the doorway.

"Monsieur, you who are interested in Paris ought to take a trip in the last metro one evening. It's worth doing. Take a number 9 and get in somewhere in Passy. I'm on duty every evening except Thursdays."

Some weeks later after dining in Avenue Mozart I took the last metro back home. I got in at Ranelagh. Apart from a couple of nondescript women and a long-haired youth half asleep over a book by Köstler, the few passengers were of fairly uniform type. They were that type of eminently respectable Parisian who appears so conventional and inhibited as to seem the survivor of another age when viewed with the eyes of the 1950's, yet who on occasion can exert such disarming charm that the foreigner forgets that this type of Parisian has learned nothing and understood nothing of two world wars. That was Passy. The couples, elegant men with trimmed moustaches and silver-handled walking-sticks and grave-looking wives all in black, got out at Muette, Pompe, Trocadero to return to their old-fashioned flats where there would be covers on the drawing-room furniture and rat-holes in the panelling of the dining-room.

The last metro rattled on. It turned aside at Iena, let the sleepy youth out at Alma-Morceau, and opened its doors to admit a dozen street-walkers at Rond Point-des-Champs Élysées. They sank down into the seats, tired and indifferent, handbags clutched

to their chests. They were all blondes, all very smart and all wore silver foxes. And all seemed to have sore feet. One of them, got up like a Hollywood queen, took off her shoes, and placed her aching feet on the seat opposite her. They had done with smiling and were all serious. At a distance they looked like wives of the nouveaux riches, and it was strange to think that in a short while they would be back in their shabby hotel rooms round Place Voltaire or Porte de Montreuil; the silver fox, the elegant dress, the high-heeled shoes, the glittering costume jewellery, the whole professional get-up would be laid aside, and the beauty of the Champs Élysées would totter into the toilet and make her coffee on a gas stove perched beside the W.C.

The last metro rushed on through Paris. At Havre-Caumartin we were joined by two homeward-bound café waiters and some theatre-goers. At Richelieu-Drouot we acquired three types with unpleasant faces and anxious eyes, a monk with a thick rope tied round his brown habit, a pair of lovers, entwined and uninterested in the world around them, two policemen and a war pensioner. At Montmartre station the Champs Élysées girls received reinforcements. The newcomers belonged not only to the light brigade but to the old guard as well. They were women in their forties, wearing plain, ill-fitting dresses, their faces painted so that they might just have walked off a stage. It would have been wrong to have called them harridans, but in another ten years they would have fallen into that category. The elegant girls shot them glances in which you could read class-contempt and dislike. It did not seem to occur to them that the lesser quarters might be where they would have to work one day.

At Bonne Nouvelle my ticket-inspector came in and inspected our tickets with the utmost care. It had been a thin day, he told me. Three second-class ticketholders travelling first and a person with an expired monthly season had been his entire catch. We got out at République. He was going to foot it to Strassbourg-Saint-

Denis where he expected to jump a disinfecting train going in the direction of Louvre. For him there was no such thing as a last metro. As for myself I wanted to get hold of a taxi. Place de la République was deserted and black. But the night air was pleasant, doubly so after the stuffiness of the Metro, and I inhaled deeply.

"Lovely air," said I.

"*Les goûts sont différents*," he replied.

To me one of the Frenchman's most attractive features has always been his ability to admire. He has a need to admire and he does so spontaneously and generously without letting himself be impeded by petty jealousy. It is a need that balances his very definite tendency towards scepticism and sarcasm.

You meet it everywhere. The newspapers explode into admiring articles about this or that celebrity; storms of applause greet a good performance in the theatre; when you talk with friends and acquaintances there is always some name which will release a cry of admiration. There is nothing false in the jubilant reception given to Mistinguette when she demonstrates her seventy-year-old charm in a scene in some revue. People admire Mistinguette because she is Mistinguette. There is nothing to stop them admiring at one and the same time Maurice Chevalier and Arthur Rubinstein, Jean-Paul Sartre and P. G. Wodehouse. It is in Paris that people discover Chaplin the philosopher and Grock the poet. To a recognized name the Parisian is always ready to raise his hat. The need to applaud lends light and colour to the city, and it is interesting to see how this need is also present in those who are applauded. You can hear a famous author and member of the *Académie* expressing his unreserved admiration for the ballad-singer in vogue. Appreciation is not, as in so many countries, largely a matter of snobbery, but is accorded to one and all who really accomplish something, no matter in what sphere. Some

years ago when the gangster and notorious gaol-breaker, Pierrot le Fou, made an especially clever escape from the prison he was in at the time, the feat occasioned a hum of admiration in the entire Press. A little later it became known that the only thing the police had found in his cell was a novel by Gide. The criminal reporters named this anti-social individual "the literary gangster king". To be a gangster king is already much, but to be a literary gangster king in a city which has so great a respect for literature as Paris is something really tremendous.

All this enthusiasm is directed at the individual, at those who have succeeded best in their profession. There is also a collective admiration, that of the men for the women. It is an old saying that Paris is for women what London is for men. To London you can add Stockholm, Berlin and a number of other cities as well. In Paris it is the women round whom everything revolves; in London and elsewhere rather the men. Bond Street is more for the English man than the English woman. The English equivalent of the Paris fashion house is the gentleman's tailor, where incidentally the best cutters happen to be Swedes! In Paris business competes for the favours of the women, and a street like Faubourg St. Honoré with its hundreds of luxury shops is one long homage to the sex which in France is not the weaker.

It is no empty phrase to say that in France it is the women who rule. The dominant position of the wife within the family, for example, always amazes the Germanic foreigner. But this domination is exercised with great charm and intelligence. The French woman is extraordinarily aware of her duties to husband and children. Her sense of duty extends even to her husband's career and future. In a country like France where connections and social life play so remarkable a part in success, a wife's abilities as hostess are of direct economic importance. With her clear perception of the realities of life the Frenchwoman is at extraordinary pains to entertain and charm her husband's chief or others who can be of

use to him. Where the good of the family is at stake even a very drastic cynicism can be morally justified, but whatever the circumstances, it is a cynicism which is given cultured expression. You have to be in France to hear such remarks as: "Poor fellow, how's he going to manage with such a stupid wife!" Nor can there be many Frenchmen who will question the rightness of the old saying: "*Ce que femme veut, Dieu le veut*". If a nation like the Germans can with some justification be called a male society, then France is a female society. It is not fortuitous that the historical figure most honoured as the creator of France is that of a woman, Jeanne d'Arc; nor is it mere chance that while Uncle Sam symbolizes America and John Bull England, it is a woman, Marianne, who represents France.

To the Frenchman this is obvious and natural. He falls a prey to melancholy when he makes the acquaintance of the purely masculine atmosphere of a London club, and he has very much the same feeling if he visits a Stockholm restaurant with its predominantly male public. For him any form of social gathering at which the guests are exclusively male is deadly boring. The idea of the "stag party" is an incomprehensible Germanic eccentricity.

While the English, and the Swedes, often feel most at ease and are at their best in a gathering of men, with the Frenchman it is the other way round. It is not that he feels inhibited in male company; his conversational abilities spring from a general freedom from inhibition. It is just that he does not make the same effort. He has to be in the company of women before he feels really tempted to amuse and shine, to charm and scintillate. He wishes to impress the sex which he admires. That is what makes him the *causeur*. It is an attitude that contributes to the general social well-being of Paris. It is pleasant for the women, because the knowledge of being admired has an inspiring effect on them. It is only in such an atmosphere that that synthesis of charm, elegance and wit which is the Parisian woman could have come into being. In

London, Stockholm or elsewhere women dress for their sisters; in Paris they dress for the men.

Yes, this question of feeling at home in Paris. Some people regard it as axiomatic, but it isn't so for everybody. I am not thinking of the tourists. Whether Paris is a positive or negative experience for them is a question of chance happenings during a few weeks or days. But you can meet some foreigners who have lived in Paris for a considerable time and yet do not feel happy there. It is not a question of homesickness, an emotion which can come to anyone in a foreign country however happy he or she may be there. These are the ones who cannot reconcile themselves to the technical backwardness of Paris and all the little irritations that it undoubtedly occasions. There are people who cannot get on with French reserve and the difficulty of achieving any degree of intimate friendship; who suffer because they are alien, a fact about which there is nothing to be done, for in France the foreigner remains a foreigner. These are points of view which cannot be dismissed summarily. The remarkable thing perhaps is that those who hold them are so few. Within the foreign colony the adorers are the rule and the anti-Parisians the exception. There are foreigners who, apart from the contacts their jobs give them, have no other French connections than their maids and the owners of the local shops, and who yet love Paris as their second country. In fact one might wonder whether being at home in Paris was not rather a question of the foreigner's ability to be at home anywhere. To see that this is not so, it is enough to look at the overwhelming majority of the population, a majority comprising the French of Paris. For them Paris is everything and other cities nothing. They love their Paris with an intensity of love bordering on infatuation. Take, for instance, the popular ballads of which there is a new one almost every week and which are sung and played everywhere. Whether it is Edith Piaf, Maurice Chevalier, Charles Trenet, Georges Ulmer, Leo Férret or some other star launching

it, it will be about fondness for Paris. Everything in any way connected with the city is considered worthy of being sung. It is not only about the Seine and its white bridges, the play of colour at dusk above the seven hills and the effect of the lights that they sing, but about taxis, lamp posts, entrances to the Metro, tumble-down courtyards and shabby hotel rooms. I remember once hearing a moving song about a woman attendant of a public lavatory at Pigalle, a motif which would scarcely have been acceptable if the establishment had been anywhere but in Paris, say at Bordeaux or Lyon. It is an unreasoning and at times almost incomprehensible love. The Parisian takes it quite as a matter of course this becoming sentimental about *his* city. And what causes all this love? No one has yet given more than a partial explanation. It is due to so much being beautiful and splendid. It is because Paris, to the great benefit of the Parisians and the disadvantage of the countryside, draws all intellectual life to it. It is because of its disorder which keeps order in its place without thereby stifling it or the country-town atmosphere which makes the city so very human. It is because of its continually scintillating fireworks of frivolity and superficiality which nonetheless do not prevent valuable thinking or lasting contributions. It is because of the never broken link between old and new, and the fact that technique has remained a means and never come to be regarded as an end. It is because of the civilized tempo of life there.

A certain *bouquiniste* with whom I at times discuss things, especially the secrets of Paris, maintains that in this connection one must not forget the strong sense of solidarity which families in Paris have.

"But whatever views one puts forward they all have one thing in common," he said. "That is the European element. It is the European atmosphere of Paris you must emphasize. Victor Hugo hit the nail on the head when he said that the Europeans have no country, but that they do have a capital."

When I pressed him about the European factor, it transpired that what he had in mind was the sort of atmosphere that you got in the European capitals at the beginning of the century. He seemed to think that a sort of reflex of that friendly, pleasant age still lingered in Paris, and that that was the real reason why foreigners were enchanted. They found there much of a *douceur à vivre* which precipitate material progress had driven from their own countries.

"You are a black reactionary, Monsieur Aubin," I told him. "You seem to consider it more important that the European factor should be preserved in Paris than that the city should keep pace with the modern age. You prefer a view of picturesque tumble-down houses with insanitary dwellings to a quarter of modern blocks of flats in which people can live like human beings."

"That is where you are wrong. Even I have a slight idea of what the city needs. Who does not wish for a little less backward-ness and a little more comfort in our standard of living. Less ill-distributed prosperity, less degeneration and class antagonism . . . But that will come."

"So much the better."

"It will come. It must come, if we are to survive at all. But it will be with us as in as many other places: the changes will come about brutally and explosively without regard to continuity and harmony. The old European atmosphere of Paris will not be able to adapt itself. Enjoy it while you may, before the great, grey tedium makes its entrance. Take the opportunity and enjoy the sun-set of Europe which you are experiencing in the capital of France."

That melancholy point of view is Aubin's, not mine. What he says about family solidarity being one of Paris's most attractive characteristics is, however, quite correct. It is perhaps possible to object that strong family ties are not so much Parisian, as a French, in fact a Latin phenomenon. In the first place the common description of France as a Latin country is, of course, wrong. If

anyone is a composite product it is the Frenchman with his mixture of Germanic, Celtic and Latin blood. But even if you admit that family love seems to increase in strength the farther south you go down the Continent, that is no reason why it should burn so ardently just in the capital, Paris. In Paris there is so much which you would expect to loosen the ties of family. You have only to think of the unlimited possibilities for entertainment and pleasure and the innumerable opportunities for making friends and acquaintances outside the family circle. In other countries lack of housing accommodation is considered one of the determinant factors in the dissolution of the family. The overcrowded conditions in which the masses live is appalling in itself. It is aggravated by so often being accompanied by primitive and unhygienic conditions. Those factors are all there in Paris, and yet family life remains one of its most characteristic features. You come across it expressed in innumerable ways. The foreigner visiting the Champs Élysées on a Sunday morning is amazed by the families out for a walk which he sees everywhere. Study the cars in the environs of the city on a Sunday: they are all stuffed with family. Look at the picnic parties in the Bois de Boulogne, they are like gatherings of clans. The tourist wonders how it is possible for the tens of thousands of small cafés, restaurants and shops to exist. Their numbers seem out of all proportion. They are made possible by the fact that parents and children stick together and work together in their little undertaking, whereby the outlay on wages is reduced to a minimum. The Durand family and their Café Select, for example, was but a drop in the Parisian ocean of family undertakings. Along with this family solidarity goes a respect for elderly people which it is salutary to see. The ties of family are stronger than all other ties. When you read in the papers of someone having escaped from prison, the account will usually end with the statement that the police are keeping a close watch on the fugitive's family. It is as though they could be sure of the poor wretch being unable to

resist the temptation of going to see his family. And just as certainly as there are few things which give such a sense of well-being as a family which really is a family, so the family solidarity of the Parisian is one of the city's most attractive features.

There was to be an inaugural dinner at Select. The café had fully come up to Durand's expectations, and after just one year's working he had a circle of steady customers and a small but profitable little restaurant business. Place Dauphine with the Palais de Justice and the Prefecture close beside it had proved to be a good business locality. The café, in fact, had flourished to such an extent that the Durands felt encouraged to expand. They had installed a *terrasse*. Durand had been to the Hôtel de Ville and been allowed to rent a few square yards of the pavement. That is what happens; the owner of the café has to rent from the city the space on which to put his tables. A couple of glass walls had been erected at either end of the rented space and above it all arched an ochre-yellow awning on which you could read SELECT – BUREAU DE TABAC. It was a magnificent awning which could be wound up and down with a crank fixed to the wall. Of course, it was a pavement restaurant in miniature. There was only room for four or five tables between the two glass walls, but the site's modest dimensions were compensated for by its *confort moderne*, that is to say, heating. The Parisian has an especial predeliction for pavement restaurants with heating. Before the war café proprietors used to put braziers on the pavement, and it was extraordinary to see how people would huddle round them and at the same time let the winter cold attack their backs, for the Parisian is anything but addicted to fresh air; in fact he loathes the cold. Inside in the café they would have been warm and comfortable; yet the glow from those pointless braziers seemed to exert an irresistible attraction. Since the war coal and coke have grown so dear that pavement stoves have disappeared. However, a number of go-ahead people

in the café world have gone in for specially constructed gas stoves instead. It was the cafés in Boulevard Montmartre which gave the lead. Now Durand had acquired such a gas stove. It just put the finishing touch to his little *terrasse* which was to be inaugurated that evening. In my capacity as Café Select's first customer I was a privileged person. Durand explained on the telephone that he was counting on my being there. We were to inaugurate the pavement addition with a dinner in the open at which the new gas stove would spread its beneficial warmth for the first time.

"You appreciate it is to be a *diner technique*," said Durand in that solemn and slightly awed tone of voice which the French often adopt when using the word technique.

It is, perhaps, not so surprising that this conservative nation of artisans with their rooted scepticism of the untried should feel not quite sure of themselves in regard to modern technique. Where literature, art, architecture, scientific research and crafts are concerned, the position is quite different. The swiftness of progress in other countries has, as far as I can judge, given the French a technical inferiority complex. Any inferiority complex creates the need for vindication. You can observe this in so simple a thing as the way the Frenchman drives a car. French culture is, if you like, a pedestrian or prandial culture. It is not a wheeled culture. You will very frequently find that even the most cultured, civilized Frenchman is transformed into a barbarian the moment he seats himself behind a steering wheel. It is as though he had to avenge himself on that monster of technique. He has to show that he is its master and not its slave, and he does that by forcing it to breaking-point, by violent manœuvre and neck-breaking application of the brakes. Many French motor-car manufacturers now vie with each other to show how modern they are. The conveyor belts in their factories run faster and faster and production figures become more and more impressive. The finished product, however, remains a mixture of the good and the bad. Your new car's engine may have

wonderful qualities, but that won't prevent the door handle falling off the first time you try to shut the door. The French makers of refrigerators are now almost innumerable. Several of these, all made far too quickly, possess refinements which would call forth admiration even in America. The public, however, prefers the American product for the simple reason that the quality is consistent. The American refrigerator is certainly made with far greater speed than the French, but in America as well as speed there is now a tradition of quality. In America that is natural, in France it is still assumed. What France has to do is to accustom an individualistic race of craftsmen to the tempo of modern production. You can't do that from one day to the next. (And will France still be France when the adjustment is eventually made?) And she needs a longish period of adaptation with protection against foreign competition. That is why France's attitude seems so contradictory today. On the one hand she feels it her European duty to try and weld together the countries of Europe along with all that that implies in the way of abolishing fiscal and monetary frontiers; while on the other hand she has to set a bad example by entrenching herself behind shockingly high tariff walls.

That, however, is to embark upon the really big problems and this is not the place to do so. Another aspect of this question of the French and technique is the reaction of the general public to new inventions. It is as if the Frenchman did not really expect the miracles of technique to function properly. They are so extraordinary in themselves that you shouldn't expect too much of them. If a Frenchman sends a book to be bound and discovers a slight fault in the binding when he gets it back, he will be furious. Of the craftsman he expects perfection. But he will not be nearly so put out if the lift door won't shut or his bath-tub leaks. His irritation will be mild and restrained by the philosophic attitude he adopts in dealing with technical surprises. A book-binding you expect to be a masterpiece of craftsmanship, a bath you expect to

go wrong – somewhere, somehow. What they and we expect of technique are as different as night and day.

I once received a visit from a fellow-countryman sojourning in Paris who had put up at one of the smaller hotels where he had a room with a bathroom. That bathroom had become almost a complex with him. Its peculiarities had caught his imagination to such an extent that he had almost no room in his head for impressions of beauty or anything to do with his visit to Paris. What worried him, he explained, was not so much the fact that it was an ordinary room which had been turned into a bathroom by installing a bath with feet, W.C. with cistern, etc.; nor that when he pulled the plug he got a shower, when he turned on the shower not a drop came out, and when he turned on the taps in the basin all they emitted was a shriek of protest. All this he felt he could have borne with equanimity. Nor was it the individual disposition of the bath which agitated him. Yet this was of a very trying character. When he turned on the hot tap nothing at all happened, while the tap marked *Froid* delivered boiling water and hissing steam. He had tried to get over this by having himself called twice: once at eight o'clock to fill the bath with scalding water, and again at nine o'clock by which time the bath should have cooled sufficiently for him to be able to get into it. This plan, however, had been defeated by his omission to turn off the tap marked *Chaud*, for just before nine o'clock it had taken it into its head to deliver ice-cold water.

It was not these trials which had got the better of him, but the pipes.

There were pipes everywhere, both in the walls and in the ceiling, he told me. There were seventeen of them altogether. He had counted them. The worst thing was that they didn't lead anywhere and that was making him nervous. He was a man with a technical bent, and he wanted to know why. Some of the pipes stuck straight out from the wall and had a tap swathed in tow at

the end of them. Others were T-shaped and had taps at both ends. Another came in through the wall, made a sort of ironical bow and went out again only to reappear a few yards further on. Its end, however, was quite open and glared at him like a horrid eye. When he blew into it, the hand-basin bubbled.

My fellow-countryman told me that there was something most irritating about a number of pipes which led nowhere, when you couldn't understand why they were there. He couldn't stop thinking about them. They pursued him when he was standing on the roof of the Arc de Triomphe, and followed him when he went up the Eiffel Tower. Then, when he was with a number of other tourists studying the pillars at Place Vendôme, he had remembered that there was one pipe which he had not yet investigated properly and which perhaps might provide the solution. He had hurried back to the hotel. That pipe came in through the outside wall and followed the wainscot, into which it disappeared like a rat into a rathole. He found it again outside his room, and followed it down the twisting corridor. After some thirty feet it dived back into the wall close beside a door. Just as he reached it, the door in question opened and an English tourist stepped out. My Swede was unable to control himself: he asked if he might look to see where the pipe went. The Englishman was most understanding and said that the plumbing in French hotels was one of the funniest things he knew. Together they went into the room and pulled out the bed, for it was under it that the pipe made its entrance.

The pipe described a hair-pin bend and disappeared into the wall about a quarter-inch from where it had come in.

"So what was it doing in the Englishman's room at all?" my Swede queried in an acrimonious tone of voice.

I once told that story to Durand. He laughed politely here and there, but it was only too easy to see that he did not find it nearly as entertaining as I. When I had finished he sat silent for a while. Then he said:

"*Que voulez-vous?* It isn't so easy to build bathrooms."

From Café Select's point of view the inaugural dinner was only a semi-success. Personally, I thought it magnificent. The setting was enchanting. The space between the two glass walls being so narrow Durand had put a dining-table athwart the pavement. The light from the door and window of the café spread a picturesque gleam among the vernal green of the trees in Place Dauphine. The few pedestrians who came that way had to make a little detour, which they did with good humour and a friendly smile. The company consisted of Monsieur and Madame Durand and Colette, plus a young man who was seated at the very end and for whose sake the pavement had been extended with a piece of planking in the gutter, so that the back legs of his chair could stand level. Durand told me confidentially that this was Colette's latest acquisition of whom he had great hopes. This time there was no question of being in the civil service; he was a thoroughly honest chap who worked in a restaurant near the Madeleine. Apart from them there was myself and the middleman, Pitou, who had now become the possessor of a baby Renault with its engine in the tail and was thus independent of the whims of the staff of the Metro. It was Pitou who had procured the gas stove and it was to that feat he owed his presence there. According to what he told me in the course of the evening Durand had got it well below the retail price. As a friend of the family he had exploited a number of his best connections. Himself he had made nothing, or almost nothing, out of the deal. Feat was the right word for it. On either side of our pleasant dinner table a row of strange objects formed a sort of hedge along the street. These were un-emptied dustbins, for on that occasion it was the dustmen of Paris who were on strike. However, they were so well arranged, so beautifully aligned, that there was something almost festive about their parade. The gathering started with pleasant conversation. Durand told us of various difficulties he had had with the glass walls and of how

was finished and ready. His wife disappeared into the café to put the finishing touches to our dinner.

Durand got to his feet. We could all see that what was about to happen constituted a big moment in his life. In authoritative tones he called:

"Madame Durand! Six aperitifs for the *terrasse*!"

That was the inaugural moment. Madame, who had apparently been waiting for that agreed signal, hastened out with a tray with glasses and bottles. We drank to our hosts, to the terrace, to Select and its success. A couple of unknowns who were watching the proceedings from the darkness under the trees applauded. The dinner was a masterpiece. Madame excelled herself, and the wines would have attracted notice at an ambassador's table.

Darkness thickened over Place Dauphine. Seen from the surrounding windows the awning must have looked like a festive Chinese lantern. Madame put on a jumper and Colette's young man, who had hung his jacket over the back of his chair, put it on again. The heat of the spring day had given place to the chill of the spring night. Both Pitou and I kept squinting at the gas stove. It was an impressive affair of nickel and white enamel attached to a gas-pipe which disappeared through a hole in the doorpost. In its centre was a large opening with an element of some sort of white substance. It was like a huge pair of jaws with white teeth in the nickel-plated face of a robot. There was an aura of hypermodern technique about it. It was named "Le Miracle". You could read the name on its forehead.

"Let's test the miracle stove!" said Colette.

Durand got down on his knees, turned a gas tap and produced a box of matches. "Le Miracle" emitted a hissing sound and burst into flame. The whole grating became red-hot and glowed like the entrance to Hades. A flood of lovely warmth spread over us.

"Wonderful!" exclaimed Pitou in a rapturous tone of voice.

"Wonderful!" agreed Durand, but there was not complete conviction in his voice. He bent towards the stove and sniffed.

"It smells," he announced.

He was right. "Le Miracle" smelt. Worse and worse. Within a few minutes a stifling stench of burned enamel had spread across the company and out over Place Dauphine.

"That's just because it's new," said Pitou. "Because it's new, and because . . ."

The rest was overwhelmed in a spasm of coughing in which even Colette found herself compelled to join. Madame pressed a handkerchief to her eyes. The robot went on with its ominous cloud-making. A pair of cats which had been keeping us company in the hope of leftovers withdrew in high dudgeon from the scene.

Durand could not control himself.

"*Quelle saleté!*"

He gave "Le Miracle" a kick which turned off the gas, whereupon the teeth again became white in the robot's jaws.

Nonetheless man had triumphed over the machine. We now retired into the café proper where the old coal stove with its long pipe was doing its duty in the same faithful manner as it had done for fifty years. Our spirits, though, were no longer quite the same. Pitou tried to entertain us with a description of a gas attack at Verdun in 1917, but it wasn't the right moment for that. Then, thank Heaven, I had an idea which saved the situation. That evening the Eiffel Tower Club was doing its stuff on the Seine.

"It's only ten o'clock. Let's go to the Trocadero Bridge and have a look at the fishermen's gala."

"I read about that in the papers," said Durand morosely. "It was to begin at nine."

"With all due respect to France, Monsieur Durand," said I, "but has there ever been an event announced to began at nine which started before ten?"

Off we went. In two cars, with Pitou's Renault in the van ("A

nice little deal, Monsieur. Twelve per cent below the factory price"), we dashed towards Trocadero. Here, perhaps, I ought to explain about the Eiffel Tower Club. Paris possesses a plethora of associations with the self-appointed duties of guardians of the city's traditions and beauties. The Eiffel Tower Club was the latest shoot on this tree. It had installed itself in one of the four feet of the Tower and was displaying all the enthusiasm of the new recruit. Some few weeks after its inception the committee had been round the city's cafés screwing brass plates to the tables at which famous authors had written about Paris. This occasion was a new and original outlet for the club's energies. An eminent member had put in a moving plea for the desperate situation of the amateur fisherman. Was there anything more Parisian than those countless fishermen who, patient and unpretentious, daily lined the quays of the Seine? Were they not just as lovable a feature of the city as the *bouquinistes* with their cases? But fish were growing fewer and fewer. The compassionate member had encountered a retired post-office official who reckoned that on the average it took two days to catch one tiny fish. Dejection reigned along the quays. *La pêche à la ligne* was in the process of dying out and the Eiffel Tower Club ought, in that member's view, to intervene. His appeal was not in vain. The committee purchased a ton of live small fish which were starved for a few days to promote a proper interest in the worms on fishermen's hooks. A summons was addressed through the newspapers to all the amateur fishermen of the city: assemble at Trocadero Bridge on Sunday next at nine o'clock in the evening. The club hired one of those anachronistic *bateaux mouches* which are used to show foreign tourists the city from the river.

We were, of course, not late at all. We were just on time. The Trocadero Bridge was black with spectators, but even so we managed to squeeze ourselves up to the parapet. A magnificent full moon was lighting up the fronts of the buildings. The quays

were crowded with fishermen wearing expectant expressions. A forest of fishing-rods waved over the water. The Eiffel Tower stretched its slender silhouette towards a silver-edged cloud, almost like a fishing-rod itself. Like a ghost from the turn of the century a white toad-like steamer came gliding up the strip of moonlight in the centre of the river. At intervals it gave a merry whoop and from a brass band on the after deck came the notes of that popular waltz "Porte-Bonheur". In the bows was a group of men and women: members of the city council, committee members, notables. In their hands they had champagne glasses. By the rail we could see some boxes with gleaming contents. The engines stopped and the steamer came to a halt. The great moment had arrived. The orchestra struck up the *Marseillaise*. The contents of the cases were tipped overboard and a flutter passed through the forest of rods. There was a glow of enthusiasm in Madame Durand's eyes.

"*Mon Dieu*, how beautiful it is!" she sighed.

It was a magnificent sight. From our vantage point we had the impression that the cases were filled with silver coins which were being emptied into the Seine. But M. Durand, the café proprietor, recalled us to reality with a thoroughly professional remark:

"There will be many restaurants with *friture* on the menu tomorrow."

Pitou, who had never abandoned his grip of realities, said:

"I'll just pop down and buy up some."

And Madame Durand, who was once more aware of the secure ground of France beneath her feet, added in a shocked tone of voice:

"What a waste! I'm sure that half the fish will get away!"

As we drove home we all agreed that it had been magnificent, and that it could only be in the city of generous ideas that the moon would receive such help in silvering a river.

# 5

Finding myself alone one evening and under the necessity of dining out, I treacherously turned my back on Select and went to Grenouille in Rue des Grands Augustins. Grenouille is one of the more curious restaurants on the Left Bank. The dirty ceiling of the room, itself like a corridor, is decorated with walking-sticks, hats, umbrellas, bottles, pails and other rubbish, which all dangle above the heads of the customers. There are no menus. On one short wall hangs a blackboard on which the day's dishes are written up in chalk. For most people the distance is too great for them to be able to see what is written there, so the waitress hands you a pair of field-glasses. The proprietor is called Roger, a stocky little man with a very unpolished manner who likes to tyrannize over his customers and refuses to serve those of whom he does not like the look. Nevertheless Grenouille is a gold mine and people queue in the evil-smelling backyard from which you enter it. In the pocket of his apron Roger carries some green tin frogs which he presents to his women customers on condition that he may kiss them.

At a table I discovered Jacques Aubert, editor of the art periodical *Demain*, enjoying a *Coque au vin*, and beside him Bill Stevens, one of that not unusual type of English intellectual who *must* live in Paris if he is to be able to live at all.

Jacques Aubert's art magazine is an exclusive affair which considers painters like Picasso conservative, if not reactionary. Its circulation cannot be much more than a thousand, but luckily Aubert does not need to live by it. *Demain* is published by a combined book-printing and publishing business in miniature in Rue des Beaux-Arts which Aubert owns. He also prints art books and

certain compendia which students at the Sorbonne use. This, I imagine, is what provides the livelihood for him and his wife, with whom he lives in a little flat above the printing shop. The art magazine, however, is his conscience and his attempt to make his voice heard in the intellectual chorus.

Bill Stevens is a tall skinny creature in his fifties with thin sparse hair, light blue rather shy eyes, who always looks as though he slept in his clothes. He belongs to that numerous colony of lost sons which England has in Paris – lost in the sense that they cannot make themselves go home again. This is a bewitchment that falls upon many people of many nationalities in this city of Paris. It is especially surprising that the English, to whom French life and ways are so foreign, should be taken that way. Stevens was a teacher by profession and could without difficulty have got himself a decent job at home. At the beginning of the 1930's he had had to decide, for if he were to get any post worth having in England he had to start competing while he was still young. Stevens chose the insecure existence of the emigrant. When you ask him why, he either will not or cannot give a definite answer. It was not the café life, or the food, or the women, or any of the classic reasons why foreigners get themselves lost in Paris. Nor were there really any intellectual reasons for his doing that. It was something as diffuse and inexplicable as the dipsomaniac's need of his bottle or the morphinist's of his syringe.

Even though things were easier before the war he had never managed to get himself a regular, safe source of income. He lived off chance teaching jobs at various schools and by giving private lessons, and there were occasional black months when he had neither the one nor the other. Now, after the war, the black months were considerably more frequent. But things were not yet too bad. Aubert used to help by giving him translation jobs and, being a bachelor with small material pretensions, he managed on less than a working man earned. He was a nice and kindly

representative of that numerous army of English emigrants living on the Left Bank. And, while on the subject, when is that army of the voluntarily damned going to get its chronicler? You meet its representatives everywhere: old ladies in eccentric clothes who live in the cheapest attic rooms of seventh-class hotels, weird figures dressed in the remains of the worn-out wardrobe of their youth, who can spend hours over a *café filtré* in their local *bistro*, white-haired men who were cradled in Manchester or Birmingham and who browse among the books of the *bouquiniste* without ever buying anything, or wander from antique shop to antique shop discussing the price of a chair or an etching which they have no possibility whatever of acquiring. Paris is the emigrants' city, but the emigrants are of two categories. Hundreds of thousands of foreigners have landed in Paris as a result of political upheavals in their own countries. These are the emigrants *malgré eux*. The others have come voluntarily and remain there because in their own countries they would feel like fish out of water and be unable to breathe. What gives the city its magic power, its peculiar attraction which induces men and women to abandon family, friends and homes in as irrational a manner as Gauguin's when he followed his irresistible inner voice? These people can live in Paris for decades before they make any French friends or gain a footing in a French family, for the French home is a fortress whose drawbridge is mostly kept up. And they feel even more lonely than in their own countries. It can happen that they never make any intimate friends among the French. But all the same they want to live in Paris. Wherein lies the explanation? It is the same as with love – you can describe the forms in which it expresses itself but not what it is.

"Paris gets under your skin," Stevens used to say. Like many of his countrymen he liked the respite from the difficulties of French given by the occasional use of an English expression. But that doesn't explain anything. It merely states the fact that to leave

Paris he found impossible. When war broke out he was compelled to return to London where he worked in a subordinate capacity in the Ministry of Information. His experience of bombs was more unpleasant than that of most people; but worst of all for him was not being able to live in Paris. How he managed it no one knows, but within a few weeks of the liberation of the city, in August 1944, he had got himself a treasured permit to visit the city. He came with a military train. Aubert, who met him at Gare du Nord, told me that there was something quite pathetic about the reunion of Stevens and Paris. He walked along the platform like one in a trance, was nudged and jostled without noticing it. His eyes caressed the yellowed, dirty hotel advertisements. At one time it looked as though he could scarcely restrain himself from kissing the sooty wall of the station hall. He was the wanderer come home. Aubert did not seem to exist as far as he was concerned.

They emerged into the open square in front of the station.

"You will have to excuse me, but I must be alone this evening. We'll be seeing each other."

At that moment a green omnibus slid past. Stevens seemed to consider it a friendly greeting from his Parisian past and jumped aboard it. Aubert, in an attempt to stop him, shouted:

"Not that one! Jump off! That isn't an ordinary bus!"

But the bus disappeared, taking with it the romantic Stevens. Aubert did not see him again for two weeks, which was quite natural. In those days there were still no buses as such. The green buses you occasionally saw on the streets were conveying quislings to the various prisons. It transpired that Stevens rode for quite a while before he discovered how weird was the vehicle he had boarded. When he recovered from his romantic delirium and began to look about him he discovered that his fellow passengers were all ashen-grey men and women who looked as though they were being taken across the Styx. There were two youths wearing handcuffs. The conductor carried an automatic pistol under his arm.

"May I alight?" said Stevens. "I got on by mistake."

"You all say that. Sit still and hold your tongue!" replied the conductor and made a gesture with his pistol that induced Stevens to refrain from further argument. The trip took him across Concorde Bridge and to the prison at Cherchemidi, where he was stuffed into a cell along with a director who had denounced people in the Resistance and a butcher from Alsace-Lorraine who worshipped Hitler. It took a fortnight before his case was cleared up.

It was not Stevens, but Aubert, who told me that tale. Stevens is not very communicative to those whom he does not know very well.

Aubert, being a typical Frenchman, had never been outside his own country, but that did not prevent him from devouring books about other people's, their manners and customs. He had a predeliction for the company of foreigners. Thus, gradually, he had arrived at certain definite opinions about the characters of the different peoples. His face would light up in malicious satisfaction whenever he had an opportunity of defining a "typical" Spaniard, Briton, German, Belgian, Russian or Swede. He would hold Stevens responsible for an anti-intellectual tendency in the British over which he had the backing of such an authority as André Siegfried. Aubert maintained that the reason why the English so often have difficulty in sympathizing with the French is because of the latter's striking intelligence which the British misinterpret as irritating intellectual arrogance.

Actually Stevens agreed with him there in principle; but however much he loved Paris, he was still British and so felt constrained to counter-attack. Cleverly enough he shifted ground, accusing the French of excessive individualism to the point of its becoming morbid. He had plenty of material proof. There was the French teachers' strike staged immediately after the written school leaving examination which left the papers uncorrected for over a month and both candidates and their parents unable to do any-

thing about it. And then the strike of the traffic constables a few years ago. This was staged during the worst part of the afternoon rush. All the traffic lights were turned off and all constables on point duty vanished. As a result the few points of the traffic regulations which the public really did observe also went by the board. People drove on the left as well as on the right, one-way streets were used in both directions, and it became quite a sport playing ninepins with pedestrians. The Place de la Concorde was turned into a sort of gigantic dodgem-car ground. Stevens' best example, however, was the strike of the orchestra at the opera, also just a few years ago. It had been a gala evening with a full house and *Carmen* on the programme. The lights had gone down and the orchestra began the famous overture. After only four bars, however, it stopped abruptly. The conductor brandished his stick like an actor duelling in a silent film, but the orchestra pit was as silent as the grave. The manager rushed to the footlights and entreated the musicians to play on; the question of wages would be arranged, the directors were favourably inclined towards the rise being asked for; but he spoke to deaf ears. He was unable to conjure up so much as one little toot on the bassoon. The audience had to queue up and get its money back.

Aubert, I must grant him that, made no attempt to defend these expressions of French temperament. But he held that one has to take the good with the bad. It is its unruly, tumultuous, uncontrollable individualism which makes France France. Anti-social phenomena like the strikes of the police and school-teachers could not be avoided. You cannot keep a fire going under a boiler without sometimes opening a valve.

"There are people who have tried to discipline us and hold us by the scruff of the neck with an iron hand. Hitler did. But Hitler's France was not France," said Aubert.

On this particular evening there were, as always, more diners

than tables and Roger was making his usual remarks in a loud whisper about those whom he considered to be eating too slowly. Stevens and Aubert had been telling stories, not just any stories, but personal experiences which could be considered typical of the teller's country. Aubert somehow conjured up a chair and I sat down at their table. While I studied the menu through the field-glasses, the two decided that now it was my turn. They wanted to hear something really Swedish.

"Have you ever really stood face to face with the very soul of Sweden?" said Aubert.

"Aubert collects national souls with the same zeal as I once collected stamps," said Stevens making an ironic gesture with the frog's leg he was holding in his fingers. "You know," he went on, "I'm not at all sure that it isn't pointless telling such stories. What seems typical to an Englishman often proves incomprehensible to the Frenchman. Aubert has just been entertaining me with what he calls characteristically French stories, and I have not been able to see anything especially French about them."

"Exactly," exclaimed Aubert, triumphantly. "Stevens does not understand the genuine Frenchness of my stories. That special lack of the ability to comprehend is itself typically English. When it comes to popular psychology the Englishman is blind."

"I could tell you of the most Swedish moment in my life," said I. "But I wonder if Stevens is not right after all. Neither of you will think my story typically Swedish. And yet – one couldn't imagine anything more Swedish."

"It is, of course, possible that Stevens will not understand it," said Aubert and laughed. "As for myself, well, we'll see."

"Let's hear it," said Stevens.

"On your own heads be it, then," said I.

And so I told them the tale. It was Christmas 1941 and I was then in England. I was asked if I would like to go with a coastal convoy sailing from the Thames estuary up through the Channel

to some North Sea port. When you receive such an invitation, you accept it so as not to show how frightened you really are. You go aboard and somewhere inside you an unpleasant voice keeps saying: Idiot! Idiot! Idiot! I was installed in the destroyer which headed the convoy and was to keep a look out for German aeroplanes, U-boats, M.T.B.s and mines. The convoy was made up of old tramp-steamers, among them a couple of Swedes which had got outside the blockade at the outbreak of war. They were all going north to load coal. The North Sea met us with a violent snowstorm. The little destroyer was flung this way and that like a nutshell, the old tramps had difficulty in keeping course, and I myself lay on my bunk in my clothes and with a life-belt round me, such being the rules. In the middle of the night I was roused by a sailor who told me that the skipper wished to see me urgently. I tumbled up on deck and tried with the help of a pocket torch to follow the sailor to the bridge. There I was met by the skipper, a snow-clad figure in mighty garments and large Mae West. He handed me a little black box from which a wire dangled.

"This is a microphone," said he. "It's connected with the loudspeaker you see up there. All ships in the convoy are equipped with loudspeakers. 'Loud hailers' we call them. It is by them that we communicate with each other. It's an excellent system. We can hear beautifully and the U-boats can't detect us with their listening apparatus as they would if we used the radio-telephone instead."

The destroyer gave a violent heave and I had to cling tight to the rail to keep on my feet.

"Well," the figure went on, "the thing is that one of our ships is keeping too low a speed. She has a Swedish skipper who is supposed to be called Anderssen. I have tried to give him an order through the loudspeaker, but he does not appear to understand English. Would you be good enough to take the microphone and say in Swedish what I want him to be told?"

So there I stood with the microphone in my hands. Out at sea there was nothing to be seen but a wall of driving snow and huge curling waves which broke over the destroyer's bows. It was, as you will realize, a queer moment. I was in the midst of a war and a violent snowstorm being asked to contact a fellow-countryman through a loudspeaker. To me it seemed as though there were something of the Stanley and Livingstone about the encounter.

"Captain Anderssen, can you hear me?" I called into the microphone. The result was amazing. Through the storm bellowed a supernatural thunderous voice. There could be no limit to its reach and strength. "Captain Anderssen, can you hear me?" it bellowed. Then I heard my voice fall silent. There was no reply.

"Try again," said the destroyer's skipper. I wiped the snow from my eyes and began again.

"Captain Anderssen, Captain Anderssen, can you hear me? It's a Swede, a countryman of yours talking . . . I'm from Stockholm; where do you come from? . . . You're keeping too low a speed. You must increase speed! . . . Captain Anderssen, can you hear me?"

Again we waited, but nothing happened. But then, a minute or so later, came another ghostly voice bellowing through the night. There was no note of cordiality in it. Far from it. It was a morose and rather irritated voice, and it didn't say much, just:

"Do you think I'm deaf, you devil!"

Aubert and Stevens prodded at their plates in silence and seemed to be pondering.

"I must admit that the point escapes me," said Stevens eventually.

"Is that a story which any Swede would understand?" queried Aubert.

"Yes, I think that they would," I replied. "There is something monumental about Captain Anderssen's reply. Every Swede to

whom I have told the story has agreed that it is undoubtedly rooted in the very soul of Sweden."

They brought us coffee. As is the way at Grenouille it was served in yoghourt mugs with snail forks instead of spoons. We stirred our mugs for a while in silence. It was Stevens who took up the thread again.

"I have told English stories which Aubert does not consider at all English, Aubert has told me French stories which to me seem typically un-French, and you have told us of the most Swedish moment of your life, about which neither Aubert nor I can see anything particularly Swedish at all. It is obvious that if we are to continue with our stories they must not deal with our own countries or our own countrymen."

"In that case," put in Aubert, "let us ask our Swedish friend to relate some really French experience he has had."

"I am afraid that would make a long story."

"The evening has scarcely begun. We have all the time in the world. But we had best go somewhere else, otherwise Roger will be furious. Roger, the bill!"

As we rose to our feet there was a rush for our table. The race was won by four middle-aged and determined women, presumably tourists.

It was a lovely spring evening, one of those warm spring nights that come to Paris like an unexpected caress at the beginning of March. We strolled up St. Germain-des-Prés. Lipp was almost empty. The geniuses had gone off to have dinner. The waiters were playing cards and Madame was quietly sipping at a beer at her desk. We installed ourselves in an out-of-the-way corner. With glasses of Martel in front of them, Stevens and Aubert settled themselves, obviously prepared for much listening. I began to tell them an adventure of my youth. For me personally that adventure is the most French of all my experiences. It is of course twenty years now since it all happened. In those days life was

easier to live in France than in any other country, for the Swedish crown was worth a lot.

"Once upon a time there was a Swedish student who came to France to learn French," I began.

Aubert made a deprecating gesture.

"You are not expecting us to listen to a fairy tale, are you? What Stevens and I expect is a true adventure, told as it happened without additions or colouring."

"One moment, Aubert. That is just what you are going to hear: a true experience, presented exactly as it happened without any attempt to colour it or improve it. So, allow me to start again. Once upon a time there was a young student who came to France to learn French . . ."

I am sorry to have to admit it, but what sent me to Chinon, that little town in Touraine, was my bad conscience.

I had spent six months in Tours, to which young foreigners are so often sent by their hopeful parents in order that they may learn French. It is a town where the best French is reputed to be spoken. The specialist will tell you that the people there speak without any provincial accent at all, as a result of which the language blossoms in all its beauty. You could not imagine a more suitable resort for a student of French.

If only that absence of accent had been of any importance! French is a complicated language which to many remains a closed book. For me it was not so much a question of being able to speak it without accent, as of being able to speak it at all. Even such a limited ambition, however, called for conscientious study, especially of grammar, endless composition and regular attendance at the *Institut d'Étranger* where instruction was given. In common with many of my Scandinavian companions I did not possess the necessary energy. There was, you see, so much else laying claim to our enthusiasms and our time: cafés, restaurants

and the sweet girls of Tours in whose dark eyes was such a glint of promise.

One May morning which was as grey and sombre as the previous night spent at the "Bal des Pompiers" had been gay, the voice of conscience suddenly spoke to me. Young man, it said, how much French have you actually learned in these last six months in Tours? I did my linguistic accounts, and the result was not impressive. My vocabulary consisted chiefly of restaurant terms and a stock of words and phrases with little value outside the city's two dance halls. Can you write a letter in French without it being full of mistakes? enquired the voice. I had to admit that I couldn't. Have you avoided the company of Scandinavians and associated exclusively with the French? An unpleasant question, that, since for the last several months my only male companions had been two Norwegians and a Dane. Can you take part in the conversation at a decorous French dinner party without committing howlers? No, no. What do you think your old father will say, who is paying for your stay here at some personal sacrifice? My head drooped at the thought of what he would say.

What I needed, I decided, was to break away from the Tours atmosphere. I ought to go to some town where there were no young Scandinavians, no foreigners at all, somewhere where I would be compelled to speak French from morning till night. A place where you could not *help* learning the darned language.

Some days later the people of Chinon might have seen a Swedish student walking down the main street carrying a suitcase in his hand, a thin, pimply youth who every now and again asked the way to Hôtel Rabelais in French that was halting to say the least of it. Chinon lies on a tributary of the Loire, called the Vienne. It is one of the most charming of all the towns of Touraine and lies, as it should, dreaming in the shadow of a ruined castle. That is no ordinary ruin, but an extensive agglomeration of walls, towers and battlements crowning the picturesque

little town like a diadem. The streets are crooked and full of surprises, with all the mystery of the medieval. Everywhere you come across lovely gateways, age-old façades and other relics of bygone times. And Chinon has plenty of memories too. Rabelais was born there, and there Richard Cœur de Lion died, and up in the white castle took place the decisive meeting between Jeanne d'Arc and Charles VII. The most enchanting thing otherwise is the market-place. On market days when the peasants bring fruit and vegetables from the surrounding countryside, the many stalls form a little town on their own, while by the lovely fountain the old men sit and talk beneath the acacia trees. Many an artist has painted the market-place in Chinon. It is, however, not only on market-days that there is life and movement there. On Sundays it serves as a promenade for the townsfolk. Dressed in their best the good people of Chinon sail up and down greeting to right and to left, exchanging ideas about the weather, the times of trains, charity bazaars and other subjects of importance in a small town. On Sundays the market-place is Chinon's brain and heart, on market-days its belly.

Hôtel Rabelais, where I had booked a room by telephone, lay in a dark street immediately behind the market-place. To call it a hotel showed a certain boastfulness. It was in fact a typical *bistro* with a couple of rooms for bed-and-breakfasters in the upper storey. Narrow worn leather seats fringed the walls round an impressive billiard-table. Above the cue-rack in the corner was the threatening notice: "Who makes the first hole in the cloth pays 200 francs." The zinc counter was surmounted by a terraced mound of bottles containing every conceivable drink. A melancholy, dusty palm leaned towards it. Through an open door you could see the pots and pans huddling on the range in a poky little kitchen without windows. It was a *bistro* like ten thousand others. A smiling serving-girl showed me the way to my room which

was reached up a rickety wooden stair. The dimensions of the room were modest, but it was neat, clean and cheap. The shutters were closed, so the girl switched on the light.

"I hope Monsieur will like it here."

She smiled and disappeared.

This friendly note was accentuated when I went down into the café again. The owners, Monsieur and Madame Felix, had lined up like a reception committee in front of the billiard table.

"We shall do our best to make you feel that you are living with a family and not in a hotel," Monsieur Felix assured me with a warming smile.

"It is I who do the cooking," said Madame. "And Rabelais is a name one has to live up to."

"Rabelais was the foremost gourmet of his time," put in Monsieur Felix, obviously unaware that the word gourmand would have been much more suitable.

"If you have any favourite dishes, do please tell us," added Madame.

They were an enchanting couple. Monsieur Felix was in outward appearance all that a publican should be, with a good-natured face in which rolls of fat snuggled together like sucking-pigs and a little black moustache which made you think of Perigord truffles. Waistcoat and trousers made a vain attempt to meet on his vaulty stomach. His wife was as voluminous. She appeared inflated to bursting point. Every now and then she apparently grew tired of struggling with her mighty bosoms and took up position behind the counter, on the edge of which she rested her burden. Her eyes shone with motherly benevolence. Together they made an enchanting picture of innocent, rural respectability. My lunch, which would have elicited an approving smile from Rabelais himself, was served as though it were a prince sitting at the table. The girl did not walk in with dishes: she brought them at the run. After each course Monsieur Felix came to enquire how I had liked it and

whether I had any special wishes. Occasionally Madame herself peered in, her brow beaded with sweat because of the heat in the kitchen, as though she did not altogether trust her husband's reports on my reactions. When the meal was over and I sat, bloated and content, stirring the coffee in my cup, Monsieur Felix appeared once again. He had his hat on.

"Monsieur, I hope you will not mind if we leave you alone until dinner. It happens that we are invited to a little celebration. *Au revoir, Monsieur, et à tout à l'heure.*"

Accompanied by his wife and the girl he disappeared on to the street and the door shut behind them. Beside me was the pile of bottles that was their stock of spirits. The door to the wine cellar was open. On the cash-desk lay a pile of notes. And there I sat, a complete stranger, with the run of the entire house.

Obviously that sort of thing makes an impression. Your heart glows. Humming to myself I went upstairs to get settled in my room.

The room was stuffy, so I opened the shutters. I wanted, too, to make acquaintance with the view that was to be mine for the next few months. The view, however, was rather an anti-climax. It was, so to speak, a special view. Immediately opposite on the other side of the narrow street was a round, green edifice of iron-sheeting of the well-known type that is to be found in all French towns. As it had no roof I was able to look right down on the two youths who happened then to be availing themselves of its convenience. One of them, whose head was bent backwards presumably in estimation of the weather in prospect, caught sight of me and gave me a charming smile. My first reaction was to ask for another room. But the other two rooms of the hotel were on the same side and had the same view. I then took the heroic decision to inure myself. I did think, too, of the historical and literary aspects attached to these *vespasiennes*, as they are called.

The term comes from that admirable Roman emperor Ves-

pasian who reigned in Rome not long after the birth of Christ, and whose care for the finances of the empire was unremitting. This practical-minded man had a large number of conveniences erected in the streets of the capital and by each put a civil servant to collect dues from those who patronized them. The arrangement functioned excellently though not without a certain amount of grumbling from the aristocrats, who thought the imperial house lost more in prestige than could be justified by the addition to its income. Vespasian's son, Titus, who assumed the role of spokesman for this view, was accused of snobbery by his materialistic father. My son, said the Emperor, holding a silver coin under Titus' nose, money has no smell! The French, who have always been impressed by Vespasian, long ago christened their public conveniences *vespasiennes*. They are a characteristic element of every street scene, and not long ago a decision by the city council of Paris to replace the *vespasiennes* with subterranean luxury conveniences with tiles and chromium plating received a very chilly reception in the Press. The *vespasienne* motif keeps cropping up in literature. In *Topaze* some imaginative gangsters tried to get money out of the proprietors of cafés by threatening to erect little green edifices of iron-plating just beside their entrances. In *Clochemerle*, a town is brought to the brink of revolution over the question of erecting a luxury model close to the church door. This latter book had not been published at the time I was in Chinon, but even so there were sufficient literary associations for me to feel that the edifice beneath my window was not without an element of romance. The worst thing was the flushing-water which ran day and night, but I grew accustomed to that as well, in the same way as one does to the noise of a waterfall or a weir. And I must to my shame confess that I obtained many an interesting insight into the life of the town through the loud conversations that were conducted in Chinon's *vespasienne*. It was a place which seemed to invite confidences.

"How do you like your room?" asked Monsieur Felix after dinner.

"Thank you, it is perfect."

"The street perhaps is a little narrow and stuffy . . ."

From the tone I realized that he was alluding to a subject which had presumably met with many a guest's disapproval.

"It is of no significance, Monsieur Felix. The room is very nice even so."

The weeks passed. I slipped more and more into the life of the French small provincial town and my knowledge of the language grew and grew. At seven o'clock each evening I used to pop into Café de la Paix et du Commerce – a high-sounding name, indeed! – where you could have a Dubonnet with the vet., a nice man, and play billiards with the headmaster of the school. Through the intermediary of that café I gradually got to know all Chinon that mattered. Several families invited me to dinner, which was itself noteworthy in view of the chilly attitude to foreigners usual in French social life. In two cases at least, the invitations were not entirely disinterested. The French as a people do not travel. They don't like it. A Swede or an Englishman is revived by a trip abroad, but the Frenchman feels that "*partir, c'est mourir un peu*". The opinion of the brothers Goncourt recorded in their diary, that journeys are nothing but a sequence of painful punishments, is the expression of a genuinely French feeling which persists today. Nor is it usual to send children to study abroad. Such eccentricity is mostly confined to the rich. Thus it was natural that in Chinon I was taken to be the offspring of a rich Swedish family, and so it was assumed that my capture as son-in-law would be attended with considerable economic advantage. The good mothers of Chinon set a golden halo round my modest head. I sat at dinner tables where unmarried young ladies bombarded me with charm at the same time as their mothers in honeyed voices asked careful questions designed to establish the exact number of

my father's millions. I was invited to go for walks in the gloaming along the Vienne and to roguish picnics at some beauty spot. I got to know the whole town. *Le jeune Suédois* was everywhere greeted with raised hats and smiles. During the Sunday promenade in the market-place I was kept busy nodding and bowing. Like most others I, too, raised my hat to the elegant Madame Tourbillon as she waddled past with three girls in their twenties stuck close to her, rather like the head of a girls' school out for an airing with her charges. Madame Tourbillon's establishment, however, was of a special kind. She ran the town's brothel which conducted its activities under the name of Pavillon Bleu near the railway station.

The people of Chinon showed a disarming tolerance which was based on general humanity. It even embraced Madame Tourbillon. An interesting exception to this rule were the two Felixes. Towards the erotic their attitude was strikingly puritanical. When the inoffensive proprietress of Pavillon Bleu came in for a glass of wine, as she sometimes did, their behaviour was quite surprising. It was as though the earth had suddenly opened and swallowed both Madame and Monsieur. Poor Madame Tourbillon had to sit alone in her corner with only the serving girl to talk to.

This lack of understanding for human frailties was also evident in another connection. The serving-girls at Hôtel Rabelais were both sweet and attractive. In actual fact, I was far more interested in them than in the husband-hunting mademoiselles with their attendant mammas. One, called Marie-Louise, came from Menilmontant in Paris, and the other, Jeanette, was from Lille. Marie-Louise had blue-black hair, dancing dark eyes, an entrancing snub-nose and a little rococo figure which called forth torrents of admiration from the old peasants who came in for beer on market-days. Jeanette was the smart, long-legged type with bleached hair, a scarlet mouth and a graceful gait that made her seem to dance across the floor. I fell deeply in love with them both. After analysing my sentiments for a few days, I decided to concentrate

my attention on Marie-Louise. I thought of her during the day, and at night I dreamed that we were sitting together in the moonlight beside a waterfall – the site of the dream perhaps being due to the proximity of the *vespasienne.* When I looked into her dark eyes, I loved her as a poet loves a star. When I let my gaze follow her rounded contours my love was shunted on to a more materialistic track. But it did not much matter which. I had at my command only a youth's scant vocabulary of love, and it was difficult to make contact. Besides, all the time I felt Madame Felix's watchful, suspicious gaze on my back, for that otherwise so exuberantly kindly woman watched over her servants' virtue like a mother over that of her unmarried daughters. Monsieur Felix also put difficulties in my way. Once when, in a moment of daring, I tried to put my arm round Marie-Louise's narrow waist, he came and told me I was wanted on the telephone, which was not the case. It was not possible to misinterpret so discreet a rebuke.

The problem, however, solved itself. Marie-Louise disappeared. Without saying good-bye. One morning when I came down to breakfast she was no longer there. Jeanette explained that illness at home had compelled her to return to Paris. She had taken the early train that morning. Her departure was not commented on by either Madame or Monsieur. As for myself my spirits rose again when Marie-Louise's successor arrived late that evening and set her suitcase on the billiard-table: a charming apparition with chestnut hair and a round little face that shone with the joy of living. She was called Geneviève. Madame received her with the motherly warmth that was so typical of her. She patted the young girl's cheek: was she tired after her journey? Would Geneviève not like to rest before they began talking about work? Some days later, it was Jeanette who vanished, similarly without saying good-bye. As far as I could make out there was sudden illness in her family in Lille. Before long Jeanette's place had also been taken, this time by a sturdy peasant girl with sad eyes who came from

Normandy. She, too, was sweet. Madame Felix had good taste when it came to engaging her serving-girls. Yet somehow she never kept them. For it was not long before even the peasant girl from Normandy had to leave. Unlike her predecessors she did say good-bye, however. She was going home to take up an inheritance left her by an uncle in Caen, she told me, almost casually, as she shook my hand. Yes, of course, it was perfectly possible. But when the red-headed Geneviève also came and told me that she too was leaving, I began to grow suspicious. Madame Felix shrugged her shoulders and flung out her hands.

"I really do have bad luck with my girls. There's always some member of their families who falls ill or dies. They're no sooner here than they have to go again."

Monsieur Felix regarded the matter as a question of morality:

"Young people are spoilt nowadays. They have become unsettled and unreliable. It was quite different twenty or thirty years ago."

"In the old days a girl would never have dared to give notice before she had been at least two or three years in a place," said Madame.

"I know, Monsieur, it is really sad," added Monsieur Felix, "girls of that irresponsible kind sooner or later land up in places like Pavillon Bleu."

All that, however, was no real explanation. The uninterrupted succession of serving-girls passing through Hôtel Rabelais remained a mystery. Madame and Monsieur's treatment of the girls could hardly have been better. They ate the same excellent food as the hotel's guests – or guest, for I was the only one. Madame always had a word of encouragement or a friendly smile for them, and Monsieur's attitude was one of patriarchal benevolence well calculated to give a girl confidence.

I never heard any of them complain. Was it perhaps the puritan attitude of their employers which irritated the girls? That hardly

seemed likely. What was expected of the girls was merely that they should behave within the walls of Hôtel Rabelais. No one seemed to worry about how or where they amused themselves on the days off. And there was something peculiar there, too. The young beauties did not seem to be interested in time off. They did not go out even on Saturday evenings, though there were always several dances in the town. You got the impression that they nourished a boundless devotion to their employers and their work. And yet they always left. They might stay one week, even two or three, but they all left without exception.

One afternoon, immediately after lunch when I was still sitting over my coffee, two stocky men came in and seated themselves at one of the tables. They wore dark clothes and bowler hats which they placed together with their umbrellas on the shelf behind the sofa. Their faces were stiff and expressionless. One had brutal features like a bludgeon. The way in which they said "*Bonjour, Madame, bonjour, Monsieur*" was completely lacking in cordiality. They were rather like the mechanical functionaries in Kafka's *Trial*: insensitive robots in the service of law and order. After a glance in my direction, which I thought rather hesitant, Monsieur Felix sat down at their table. They began a conversation in low voices. It seemed to consist mostly of questions from the two newcomers. A few isolated sentences reached my ears: How long have you had this hotel? – Three years – Where did you live before? – How many employees? – How long have they been in your service? At the end of some twenty minutes the interrogation was over, for that was obviously what it was. The inquisitors gathered up their bowlers and umbrellas and departed with a brusque and chilly "*Au revoir*". Madame, who had been standing in the kitchen listening, pulled the door shut. Monsieur Felix drew out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead:

"Damned tax hounds!"

"Oh, were they from the Revenue?"

"Our Inland Revenue does that, Monsieur. Sends out snoopers like those who ask questions and pry about trying to find *signes exterieurs de richesse* as they call it."

"Ah!"

"Then they put up your tax."

"What is our dear France coming to?" he added. "Things are not all they should be in the country."

Monsieur Felix dived into the kitchen. Through the closed door came the muffled sound of intensive argument. The hands of the serving-girl – she was called Yvonne that week – shook as she gave me the second cup of coffee for which I had asked.

Of course they were not tax inspectors. They were the advance guard of catastrophe, the long arm of the law reaching out for Hôtel Rabelais. I realized that a drama was in the offing, approaching like a black thunder cloud across our sky that till then had been so clear. Only I could not see what was occasioning it. Early next morning my eyes were opened. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that my ears were opened, for the solution of the mystery flew in through my window in the guise of a conversation being carried on in the green *vespasienne* beneath. I recognized the voices. They were those of the police inspector and the chemist. The latter's contribution consisted mainly of meaningless ejaculations of amazement.

"And now we've got him."

"What in all the world – "

"*Maquereau!*"

"But heavens alive – "

"*Maquereau!* One of the worst in Paris."

"What, what?"

"The girls are sent to Algiers and South America. Especially good connections in Buenos Aires."

"But how – ? "

"Yes, he'll get ten or fifteen years for it."

"What a dreadful – "

"Yes, but we got him in the end all right."

So Monsieur Felix was a *maquereau*! Monsieur Felix of all people a white-slaver! Not one of the old penny-dreadful type who kidnapped young women and sent them as prisoners to a cruel unmentionable fate. Monsieur Felix's methods were more subtle than that. He used persuasion and seductive description of future financial reward, kindliness and the shelter of words. Hôtel Rabelais was a station on the way, a depot to which his agents sent girls willing to adopt the profession, and there they received their instructions and awaited suitable sailings from Marseilles or Bordeaux. At that moment Geneviève was probably sitting on her suitcase waiting in the port of Marseilles, Jeanette was presumably on board a steamer, and Marie-Louise would already have started work in some South American capital under supervision of some obese colleague of Madame Tourbillon. What sort of a house had I got into! And how could it be possible? That pleasant, nice Monsieur Felix with his orthodox ideas of right and wrong! Who always looked quite despairing if I lost two games on end when we played billiards together. His conversation, often flavoured with literary allusions, had considerable charm. Rabelais was his literary idol. He had at times thought of renaming the hotel *Relais Pantagruel* and setting Gargantua's motto over the door:

*Lever matin n'est point bonheur*
*Boire matin est le meilleur.*

He often said that nice people were always fond of good food. At times he quoted a saying of Alexandre Dumas, the Younger, to the effect that all human activities ultimately depend on the stomach, and that the possessor of a properly functioning and well-filled stomach is predestined to perform good deeds. If the theory held water, then my food-worshipping publican should not have been capable of killing a fly. And his wife! A woman who

was the essence of obligingness and benevolence, who looked after her young Swedish lodger with all the tenderness a mother gives her son, and who never tired of trying to induce him to express some gastronomic wish. How was it possible?

I dressed hurriedly and tumbled down the creaky staircase. Hôtel Rabelais appeared deserted. Monsieur Felix had evidently been taken off already, but apparently Madame not yet, for I could hear her carrying on a whispered conversation with Yvonne in the bedroom. The table was not laid. The unwashed dishes of the previous day were still piled up in the kitchen. I dashed out and to Café de la Paix et du Commerce. Whatever fantastic events I had got embroiled in, I had to have breakfast.

That breakfast remains, so to speak, burned on my memory. The fact that I lived in the lion's den made me a person of extreme interest. Within a few minutes I had ten people at my table. Within a quarter of an hour I was sipping my *café au lait* in the middle of what can only be called a crowd. I was subjected to a rain of questions, squeezed like a lemon. The editor of the local newspaper, with steel-rimmed spectacles on his nose and a notebook in his hand, was the most persistent of them all. There wasn't one detail of my long sojourn in Hôtel Rabelais which that conscientious reporter did not consider worthy to discuss again and again. Occasionally someone would detach themselves from the crowd and vanish through the door only to reappear almost at once with ten or so others in tow. As well as being the object of much curiosity I also attracted considerable sympathy. It was dreadful that I, a foreigner, should have landed in such a nest. What would I think of France? What I must do was to move – now, immediately, without a moment's delay. A grocer offered me the temporary shelter of his salon. The owner of Hôtel de France expressed himself willing to turn out one of his guests, for the hotel was full, in order – as he said – to extricate me from the cesspool into which I had fallen through no fault of my own. A

youth came panting in from the street with a similar offer from Hôtel Boule D'Or. The one offer followed the other. Soon there wasn't a family in Chinon that did not wish to join in the work of rescuing and harbouring the pure-hearted young Swede. I had become an object of competition. Old antagonisms and newly buried jealousies flared up again.

The drama of Hôtel Rabelais rocked Chinon to its age-old foundations. If the custodian of the ruined castle had begun to ring the ancient tocsin none would have seen anything abnormal in it. The word *maquereau* flew from mouth to mouth with swift wing-beats. It made its way through all windows and doors, into every room, into every ear. Felix is a *maquereau*! Felix is a *maquereau*! Meanwhile, in the one and only cell in the *Palais de Justice* in the square sat Monsieur Felix in person. Bereft of collar, braces and shoe-laces, pondering his ill-fortune. And since it was market-day there was a seething crowd outside the temple of justice. *Maquereau!*

Somewhat bewildered by all the commotion I squeezed through the crowd and made my way back to Hôtel Rabelais to pack. It was still deserted. The mumble of talk from Madame's bedroom had now become a suppressed muffled sobbing. In ten minutes I had packed. Downstairs again I searched for Yvonne to ask for my bill. Yvonne was not to be found. However, one of the upstairs doors suddenly creaked and down the stairs came Madame Felix. She moved with obvious difficulty and held one hand clamped to her heart. Her disordered hair tumbled over a half-open flowered peignoir. There was no getting away from it: she was a harrowing sight. She was like a grotesque but moving parody of the heroine of a classic tragedy upon whom the gods had vented their wrath.

"You are leaving us, Monsieur?"

I stammered something about the need to resume my studies in Tours.

"I understand, I understand . . ."

She produced my bill from a drawer behind the counter. It was up to date and totalled. I paid in silence.

"I hope that you have no complaints?"

Complaints? A succulent Gargantuan revue passed before my eyes: steaks through which a knife cut like butter, tender chickens roasted *au point*, fresh trout, pasties and the various specialities of Chinon, fresh potatoes fried in butter, the wines of Touraine, as delicious and light as sunshine in the spring, the dusty bottle of cognac marked 1875.

"Madame, I have no words – "

She dried her eyes with a handkerchief and gave me a look which was that of the condemned person on the block.

"I have done all in my power to be a mother to you. My husband and I have become very fond of you."

"Madame, I assure you – "

"Monsieur Felix has been visited with a great sorrow."

She nearly always spoke of her husband as Monsieur Felix.

"A very great and grievous sorrow."

What was I to say? The delicate expression "sorrow" made all discussion of crime and drama impossible.

"And now I should like to ask you to do me one favour, one service before you leave . . ."

A surge of ghastly foreboding welled up inside me. One service before I left – that sounded ominous. That augured something unpleasant. "Put an end to this conversation," cried a warning voice inside me. "Say good-bye and get out. The quicker the better!"

Madame Felix riveted two suffering eyes upon me.

"I have been out for a little while this forenoon. It was dreadful. Oh, Monsieur . . ."

She looked as though she were going to faint. I pulled forward a chair into which she sank, and fetched a glass of water from the kitchen.

"Dreadful! Dreadful!"

Her account of it came like an explosion. She had walked down the market-place. Everybody she knew had turned away or pretended not to see her. She had heard abuse flung after her. A boy had danced in front of her brandishing a piece of paper on which the word *grue* was written in large letters. An egg had come whistling through the air and broken against her bag. She had tried to say a few words to Monsieur Gauffier, the coal merchant. Demonstratively he had turned about and walked swiftly away. Humilitated and in tears, she had hastened back to the hotel.

"And that Gauffier! He who is always complaining that they don't change the girls often enough at Pavillon Bleu!"

"Look out!" cried the voice of common sense within me. "Get out! Don't get into the pitfall she is preparing for you."

"I had a heart attack when I got back. And my drops were finished. I didn't dare go to the chemist."

She wants me to get her some medicine, I thought, and felt relieved. But it was a far more bitter cup than that which was being prepared for me.

"You have a kind heart, Monsieur. I know that you have a kind heart. You are a gentleman. You could never treat a poor woman in that fashion. The service I would ask . . ."

The rest was drowned in a paroxysm of weeping.

"The service, the favour, is this: do something to rehabilitate me. Show them that at least there is one person who will accept my company, someone who has the courage to act like a gentleman . . ."

She peered at me over the top of her handkerchief.

"Monsieur, I beg you! Fetch the car from the garage and drive me once or twice round the square . . . Monsieur Felix left the keys in it."

It was my turn to feel weak at the knees. The warning voice inside me became frantic: "For God's sake think what you're

doing. Don't lose your senses . . ." But, on the other hand, there sat a poor humiliated woman who had always been touchingly kind to me, who perhaps had not taken any active part in the traffic in girls. Who knows, perhaps she had sorrowed over it at times when she was alone . . . "Think what you are doing! Don't you understand that they're scoundrels? . . ." Yes, but a woman is still a woman. You can't just behave anyhow when catastrophe has befallen a fellow human being who then tries to save her self-respect, but can't . . . "Idiot! Put an end to the conversation and get out!"

I raised my eyes and met Madame Felix's tearful heart-rending gaze. Then with an icy shiver of horror I heard my own voice saying:

"Of course, Madame! Who could possibly refuse such a request?"

"How shall I ever be able to thank you!"

She stood up and went to her room to get herself ready. I went to the garage. My head felt empty and peculiar. It felt as though my shoes had leaden soles. Monsieur Felix's car was an open, orange-yellow 1925 Citröen, usually difficult to start. That day it started at the first attempt. A quarter of an hour later Madame Felix was ready and got in beside me. She had put on her very best. Her black hair was surmounted with a hat most daringly coloured. Her fat cheeks had acquired a schoolgirl complexion. Round her scarlet mouth played a proud and contemptuous smile. In one hand she held a rose. There was indeed something very impressive about her challenge, though nothing impressive about her escort. What Chinon saw was a deathly pale, rather skinny, nervously fumbling youth with scarlet lobes who manœuvred the car towards the market-place, with much grinding of gears. There was, however, a sort of bitter defiance in my breast. I felt like a martyr of the French Revolution being forced to drive his own tumbril to the scaffold in Place de la Concorde.

Thus, *le jeune Suédois*, Chinon's sought-after, favoured guest, drove through the crowded streets with the white-slaver's wife seated beside him.

The picture of that gauntlet-run will always remain fresh in my memory, as excruciating and macabre as a nightmare that is never expunged. Now, twenty years later, I have only to close my eyes to see that mass of faces: amazed gaping mouths changing into derisive grins. Hundreds of merciless eyes stabbed me like needles. Heads bent together in hissing talk. News of the unexpected turn in the *affaire Felix* spread to the neighbouring streets and made the crowd grow even thicker. I tried not to look either to the right or to the left, but just to drive ahead squeezing the bulb of the old-fashioned horn. Madame Felix's face kept its superior smile, but otherwise it was as stiff as that of a wax figure. As we passed the *Palais de Justice* where her husband had his involuntary quarters she threw a graceful kiss at the one window which had bars on the outside. In its way it was a magnificent gesture. But it set up a fresh wave of heads going together and caused the colour in my cheeks to turn from pink to scarlet. There was no abuse, no menacing gestures. Not even when the engine stalled in the middle of the market-place – yes, that too! – and I had to get out to start it with the handle, was there any sort of demonstration. That made my *via dolorosa* even more dreadful. A thrown stone, a rotten egg, any outburst like that I should have felt as a liberation. But that whispering, staring, derisive attitude was ghastly.

Our drive must have lasted some ten minutes. When at last we got back to the hotel it felt as though we had been away ten years. As I rushed in to get my suitcase I glanced at myself in the mirror. I remember how surprised I was that my hair had not turned white. Madame Felix remained standing in the doorway.

"No one could ever say you weren't a gentleman!" said she, dabbing her eyes with her handkerchief.

"May I tell Monsieur Felix that you are thinking of him?" she added.

"I shall never forget him, Madame!"

She held out her hand, I took it and dropped it with equal celerity. Then with all the haste of the fugitive I set off at a jog-trot in the direction of the railway station. Madame Felix stood on the doorstep waving to me with an affectionate maternal smile on her lips.

By the time I reached the end of my tale, the young geniuses of both sexes were returning to resume possession of Lipp and so we left. Stevens knew a new place in Rue de l'Université which he said was worth a visit.

"You won't mind if I ask one little question about that adventure of yours in Chinon," said Stevens after we had settled ourselves and the waitress had brought us each a glass of white eau-de-vie in which swam red berries. "We agreed that your story was to be free of all colouring. Is it really possible . . .?"

Aubert also moved closer.

"I was just going to ask that very thing."

"Don't be embarrassed," said I. "I am grateful for your doubts. It enables me to relate the sequel. Two or three years ago, that is some fifteen years after the event, my wife and I went in the car to Chinon. She had heard the story innumerable times and, like you, she had had her doubts. We went into an antique shop to buy two Italian plates. 'I once lived here when I was young,' said I. 'In the old days wasn't there someone – what was he called – a certain Monsieur Felix . . .?' The old man gave a start. Then he embarked upon an eager account of those troubled days, while my wife listened intently. Believe me it was a great moment. And it was not diminished in any way by his final words: 'Just imagine, Madame, a young Scandinavian was *complice*!' "

# 6

"Place Maubert!" said I and turned the handle of the door. But the driver stopped me with a forbidding look.

"That's not my direction."

"Why then have you got your 'free' sign up?"

"That's not my direction."

"Are you free or are you not free?"

"I am not driving in that direction, Monsieur, I have not had my dinner yet. My direction is Étoile."

"And if you get double the tariff?"

"Get in, Monsieur, get in."

The taxi-drivers are a curious part of the fauna of Paris. They occur in two editions. The first is usually a scraggy old man much the worse for cold and weather. He sits at the wheel of his shabby vehicle like a mossy stump, enveloped in a dirty overcoat and with an old hat or cap pulled low over his ears. The worn corduroy upholstery of the back seat also makes you think of moss. The entire vehicle appears to have been obtained from a dump. Between the man's lips hangs the remains of a long-since extinguished Caporal. He is the freebooter of the boulevards, a king in his wheeled world, who treats pedestrians with contempt or kindliness according to his mood or his interests. He is as independent as a tramp and as thrifty as a Levantine. And an excellent psychologist. As he crawls along by the pavement with his cab empty, his experienced eye will estimate the worth of a signalling pedestrian in a fraction of a second. The chaff is sifted from the wheat with icy certitude. If the would-be passenger looks as though he was mean with his tips, the driver can suddenly become both blind and deaf. If the person in question is a foreigner, especially

of the lost tourist type, he only needs to glance at the taxi and it will come to an abrupt halt as though an iron bar had been thrust between the spokes.

That picture, however, requires completing. It would be unjust merely to present our taxi-dictator as a greedy profiteer growing fat on people's need to get about. The mere fact that his calling is hard and provides so meagre an income is reason enough to mitigate one's judgement. When he so wishes he can be disarmingly charming and fascinate his passenger. If he feels pleased with life it would be nothing unusual for him to give some poor person a free ride. And don't forget 1914! Don't forget that many of these surly old men were among the thousands of Paris drivers who braved death to take reinforcements to the front when General von Kluck's army was so close that its advance elements could already see the Eiffel Tower. The roads out were under fire and in the woods through which they ran roamed German patrols. An endless string of age-old taxis crammed with soldiers streamed towards Meaux and Coulommiers. There were so many men in each that they had to sit on each other's knees and stick their rifles through the windows. Fired by that abstract concept *La Patrie* which in certain situations seems able to get the individualistic French to make a real collective effort, the taxi-drivers ran a shuttle-service between the city and the wavering front. That, too, is part of the picture.

The other type of Paris taxi-driver has a distinctive cast of countenance. He seems to have an objection to grey dustcoats and is altogether far more ordinary and civilian in appearance. His cheekbones are often high and protruding, his eyes narrow. In regard to his passengers he is less sharp and more accommodating. He is Russian. He has a special though unintentional trade mark: a cigarette-holder. By that you can know that he is Russian even before he opens his mouth and betrays the fact by his broken French which is typical of the Russian émigrés despite all that is

said and written about their talent for languages. This distinguishing mark has its advantages, for the Russian is known for his honesty, and on Boulevard St. Michel you will see women going from cab to cab on the rank looking for a driver with a cigarette-holder. He will not, however, be the former general or Grand Duke which popular fantasy likes to make him. Emigrants of that type never drove a taxi in Paris. Of the thousand or so Russian taxi-drivers who still remain of the original five thousand, it is said that scarcely ten per cent possess a college or university education. They have a sort of club in a back street tucked away somewhere in the fifteenth arrondissement with a restaurant and Russian food. An assessor, a colonel and a naval captain comprise its upper class.

The reason why so many of the émigré Russians became taxi-drivers is not without interest. Whether or not they had a higher education they were practically all from bourgeois homes. When wars and revolutions force people to de-class themselves, they naturally do what they can to make the fall as soft as possible. Few occupations in Paris give such freedom as that of taxi-drivers. Whether they are employed by a company or by a private taxi-proprietor, they are largely masters of their own time. That suited the refugee Russians very well indeed. They did not risk dismissal by arriving late or for lack of punctuality. They had at their disposal a car and could, if they wished, pay a visit to friends between fares. When the need of money made itself felt, they plied for hire again. Despite the great revolution they could still remain to some extent gentlemen. Both categories, however, are haunted by the same spectre, that of old age. A taxi-driver cannot afford to to be ill or old. He gets no pension, has no insurance, no dole to fall back upon. His health is the capital on which he is compelled to live.

"*Voilà Place Maubert, Monsieur.*"

"Can you wait ten minutes? After that I am going back to St. Germain."

"That is not my direction, Monsieur."

"What on earth is your direction, then? Weren't you just saying it was Étoile?"

"I have an acquaintance near here on whom I must call."

"And what about double fare?"

"That of course alters the situation. One has to live. *La vie est dure, Monsieur.*"

You know how it is with the different districts of a big capital city like Paris. You visit a part of the city, perhaps several times, and a number of impressions remain in your mind's eye: picturesque houses, romantic alleyways, amusing shops, ancient monuments. These visual impressions later merge into a whole and after a while you have a recollected image of whose correctness you yourself are persuaded. Then you get to know someone who actually lives in that district and through whom you come to see it from the inside. Often your recollected picture will prove as false as the colours of a picture postcard. The romantic colours prove to be frightening and gloomy. Or perhaps it is the other way round. A district which you thought depressing acquires a shimmer of poetry which you had never suspected. As far as Place Maubert was concerned – the name stands for the whole district round the *place* itself – I had in the beginning been fascinated by things which seemed entrancingly picturesque, so entrancing that the vitiated air of the alleyways seemed picturesque too. There was, for example, one view down a street which conveyed excellent impressions of a dark dirty passageway through which you looked as through a sewage pipe to see a dazzlingly white, sunlit Notre-Dame at its mouth.

Then I got to know Rudolphe, a young student reading the humanities at the Sorbonne, who lived in one of the side streets together with a number of his fellows. His name was not the only similarity between him and the poet in Henri Murger's *Bohème.*

There were other more characteristic links: the chronic money difficulties, the wretched way in which he lived, the firm conviction that Our Lord will feed the little birds of the air whatever they do or get up to. He had a little girl friend. She was called Adèle; but when your name was Rudolphe, you were reading literature, and living like a bohemian it was inevitable that your friend should be nicknamed Mimi. That was what had happened. As far as appearances went, however, no one could have been less like her consumptive chlorotic namesake than the Mimi of 1950. Small, snub-nosed and short-legged, she was a picture of health. After a riotous night with Rudolphe and his friends she would go straight to the paper merchants in Rue Bonaparte where she worked and still look as though she had just returned from a holiday.

Nor did she live with her Rudolphe. That was not because she had any moral scruples, but because of the kind of house where her friend had managed to find a roof thanks to the assistance of the university. In reality though, no surroundings should have been more suited to young love living together, for Rudolphe was lodged in a house of ill fame of the kind that in Paris goes by the name of *maison close*. What had happened was that Rudolphe was benefiting from the *vague de la pudeur* which swept through the city at the end of the war. It all began when a woman city councillor with a passion for morality, Marthe Richard, succeeded in getting adopted a resolution to have the city's thousands of brothels closed. Whether the city has thereby been made any more virtuous is doubted by most people. The army of girls which has since invaded the Champs Élysées and other places points to nothing having changed but the form, which has thus grown coarser, and the prevalence of disease which has increased alarmingly. Marthe Richard's resolution created another problem: what to do with the forbidden haunts of wantonness? It was decided that they should be used to help overcome the lack of

accommodation for the students of Paris. This characteristic expression of French realism resulted in the various faculties being allotted certain of those often very comfortable houses as hostels for their students. Rudolphe had been assigned a room in *La Rose Jolie* which lay in a little street immediately behind Place Maubert. The gilt-framed mirrors on the walls and ceilings now reflected other sights than those of before the war: youthful heads bowed over text-books and handbooks. Rudolphe's room was especially well equipped with mirrors, so that when you came in you saw no less than ten industrious Rudolphes bent over Sainte-Beuve's *Les Illusions du Cœur* or *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* of Marcel Proust. A thick-set woman with silvery hair watched over the students' morals, turning away all female visitors with scandalized protests. This was the former manageress of *La Rose Jolie*. France being a humane country no one could see why *Madame la patronne* should be shown the door just because manners had undergone a change. According to what Rudolphe told me, Madame discharged her new, or shall we say altered, duties as efficiently as though she had been in charge of student hostels all her life. Only once a year did *La Rose Jolie* revert to its gay past and then in a very innocent manner. On 14th July old patrons of the pre-war days come in pilgrimage to the temple of love where they are allowed a quick peep into the blue room, the pink room or whatever room it is with which their pleasantest memories are associated. That, however, is only allowed on that one special day when the French Republic wishes all its children to be glad and happy. Otherwise *La Rose Jolie* is exclusively a students' hostel, one of the many of its kind where poor students can have food, a room and a bed – an excellent bed – for about £6 a month. That is a very welcome help. Of the sixty thousand students who walk the pavements of the Left Bank, only sixteen per cent are able to live at home. The majority of the others have to contend with pecuniary difficulties and a high percentage supplement their

incomes by taking all sorts of extra jobs such as newspaper sellers, waiters and porters in Les Halles, temporary postmen and as printers' readers – as anything, no matter what, as long as it does not mean devoting the whole day to it.

But to revert to Place Maubert. It was through my talks with Rudolphe that my opinion of the district underwent a radical change. It was as though we had been walking in the forest and lifted a lovely old stone overgrown with decorative moss and ringed with greenery and flowers. In the damp soil beneath crawled and bustled strange insects in weird holes and passages. The world beneath that stone was frightening, even repulsive; but it was also fascinating and worth getting to know. And besides – where there is shadow there is also light.

In every big city there exists a category of people to whom attaches the brutal word "dregs". They are those who have no work in the proper sense, but nonetheless cannot be accounted unemployed and be comforted with a dole. The sociologist calls them the workshy; but that is an official expression and as hard and undifferentiated as such usually are. They are shy of working in the sense that they refuse to sell their freedom for a monthly salary or a weekly wage. They set themselves outside the normal rules which apply for normal ants in the great ant-heap. By begging, however, rag-picking, pilfering and lending a hand at warehouses and stations they do work in their own way. Their plans for the future seldom extend farther ahead than the next twenty-four hours. Incomes are meagre, yet generally suffice for bread and wine and some sort of lodging. Besides they enjoy certain advantages: no taxes, no duties, no hours of work, no bosses.

In Paris the army of them is reckoned at twenty thousand. The individual member of the fraternity is called a *clochard*, which means something between our tramp, beggar and docker. The man who goes round the houses singing in an intolerably raucous

voice is a *clochard.* The tatterdemalions who live under the bridges, the scarecrows who rummage in garbage-tins, the cripples who beg at the street corners, are all *clochards.* The term, which is not an old one, has its history. Three or four decades ago there were certain cafés which the outcasts used to visit when night fell. They would sit on the benches sipping their wine and hunting their lice. When the time came to turn out the lights the proprietor would stretch a long rope immediately above the tables. The beggars and rag-pickers rested their elbows and head against the rope and slept like that. It was better than lying face down on the tops of the tables. At six o'clock the lights would be turned on again. The café proprietor then rang a bell – a *cloche* – and suddenly untied the rope, whereupon those of his patrons whom the signal had not awakened fell down thud on the table. That is the origin of the word *clochard*, according to what they tell you in Paris. Now, the expression is generally accepted. No other word is used in literature or the Press. Those of the tatterdemalion army which stick to the Left Bank even publish a newspaper – oh, that Left Bank – called *Le Clochard*, which carries articles on literature and politics written by intellectuals whom drink or the fact of having got at cross-purposes with the law has submerged in the mire of the great city. Before the war this extraordinary organ had a circulation of 31,000.

Most of the population of the dark streets round Place Maubert are *clochards.* Their dwellings would give a sanitary inspector nightmares. Paris originally started on the Cité island, but then gradually it began to take in the river banks on either side of the island. Place Maubert was one of the first of those colonies. Its streets and passageways had very much the same aspect in the thirteenth century as they have today, only there was then nothing called Place Maubert. On the other hand a famous Dominican monk used to roam the streets and give daring lectures on theological subjects and alchemy. His name was Albert. His adherents

called him Albert le Grand, his opponents preferred to say Albert le Mauvais. Gradually the *mauvais* became the more common, hence the word Maubert, a contraction of mauvais and Albert. Thus Place Maubert is "bad Albert's Square", a name which suits the quarter most aptly now, several centuries later.

The people who live round "Bad Albert's Square" are of two kinds: black and white. The black are North Africans. France suffers from a considerable shortage of labour – since the departure of the German P.O.W.s. The majority of the Polish miners made their way to the new Poland, and a depressingly small number of Italians responded to the enticements of the government recruiting board. The authorities then turned their attention to the French possessions in North Africa, and tens of thousands of Arabs have signed on for work in France since the end of the war and have been employed in the mines and elsewhere. In innumerable cases the persons only signed the contract in order to get to Europe. When their term is up these coloured workers make their way to Paris, the city of great possibilities, there to seek their fortunes and make themselves independent. Scarcely any of them do. The extent of this invasion has created a serious problem for the city's authorities. The Arabs now occupy first place among the long list of Paris's *mauvais garçons*. They have specialized in assault, thieving, burglary and card-sharping. A not inconsiderable proportion of their numbers is now to be found living round Place Maubert, which is apparently regarded as a suitable milieu. They live ten or fifteen together in the one room and spend their days hanging about the cafés and playing cards, or perhaps just hanging about. When night falls these dusky immigrants set forth on expeditions of whose character it is perhaps best not to speak. Sometimes they take a night off, for even a man whose conscience is as black as his complexion requires a little leisure now and again, and then they go to one of those exotic restaurants which have grown up in the wake of the invasion from North Africa, for

example to El Koutoubia, where queer tea tasting of menthol is served to the strains of an orchestra of guitars. Sometimes tempers boil over in connection with the division of the spoils of the previous night. When that happens the police patrols may easily find the body of a dark-skinned man lying in the gutter of Rue des Carmes or Rue Galande with a knife in his stomach. There will be nobody else to be seen, not even one of the stabbed man's friends, for no Arab in Paris ever knows anything at all about such things.

All that is exciting in its way, but it is still the white population of the district which is the more interesting. Here you come across the real *clochards*, weird wrecks of humanity of whom no one knows whence they came. Some obtain a livelihood hauling the heavy trolleys of Les Halles which are popularly called *diables*. Others roam the parks, cut leafy branches off the trees – which is forbidden – and sell them to fruiterers who use them as a bed on which to display their peaches and lemons. Others specialize in collecting cigarette stumps from the pavements; from these the paper is carefully removed and the tobacco then mixed and sold to people who smoke pipes or roll their own cigarettes. Begging is another profession and may be practised with or without an accompanying service such as singing. Those *clochards* with an appreciation of the refinements of psychology will often borrow the dirty little boys of the district, for when they have such a little ragamuffin by their sides purses are often more readily opened. Others sneak about Les Halles at nine or ten o'clock in the morning when trade is slackening off. It is always possible then to sneak a small cheese, a bunch of radishes or a few lemons, which the *clochard* then arranges on the pavement outside Café de la Commerce and tries to sell to the passers-by. Their means of livelihood are many and astounding; yet perhaps the strangest thing about them is that they come off. They come off so well that a number of shabby cafés and hotels are able to get along with no other

patrons than *les clochards*. The mysterious rule that in a great city everybody lives on everybody else seems to apply equally well to the lowest stratum. What unpleasant glimpses of human misery, you say. Perhaps, but – beware of pity! Even the outcasts of Place Maubert have their solaces, their causes of rejoicing. The most important is wine. The wine lorries, which have elongated iron cisterns making them look like petrol tankers, drive up every day to the different cafés and through their thick pipes discharge the elixir which gives meaning to the *clochards'* existence. There are in our world an incalculable host of those for whom sleep does not suffice to make their sufferings recede, says Baudelaire, and for them wine composes both songs and poems. The lawless ones of Place Maubert are almost all wine-bibbers. Without wine they would commit suicide or else waste away and die. They live for wine and by it. In the cafés they feel themselves proud, free and rich.

To quote Baudelaire again: wine climbs invisible steps into the brain and performs its magnificent dance. Rags, vermin, poverty become of no account. The pumping of the red fluid from the tanker into the vat under the floor of the café is the blood transfusion which enables Place Maubert to live.

However, I have not yet mentioned the most important occupation of all those practised around Place Maubert, that which provides the most characteristic feature of the district's appearance. It is that of *les chiffoniers*, the rag-and-bone men. They live on people's inability to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials. Much of what people in a big city fling into their dust-bins as worn-out and worthless is in actual fact both usable and valuable. The rag-and-bone men examine the dust-bin with trained expert eye. There is always something saleable there, if only cloth and paper. And then there are also the possibilities of chance finds. Perhaps a diamond stud has been left in that discarded shirt; perhaps a note lies forgotten in that old note-case; perhaps a cracked

picture was painted by an old master. Perhaps . . . The whole city is a roulette board whose numbers are the dust-bins. One fine day your number may turn up. These rag-and-bone men work their claims with the same trembling hopefulness as the gold-diggers did in Klondyke in the old days. Like South Sea pearl-fishers they dive into their sea of garbage; and, when day breaks, they make off back with their catch to their little ports by the Seine. In reality it is very seldom they strike lucky in a dust-bin; but like all gamblers the rag-and-bone man likes to lie about the finds of which he dreams. There are countless tall stories to be heard in the cafés of Place Maubert. But, unlike the green table, the dust-bins always yield something, always enough for a little food and a litre of wine.

When night falls the rag-and-bone men set out on their hunting. By the light of the street lamps you see them emerging from gateways and courtyards. Some pull little carts, but most push a rickety old pram from which the hood has been removed. If a rag-and-bone man is not sufficiently well off to run his own pram – there are degrees of fortune in this profession too – he can hire one. He can go to one of two shops which are filled with rusty old prams from floor to ceiling, and from it obtain this indispensable accessory by leaving a pledge and paying so much an hour. It is in these prams that the treasure trove is placed.

It is quite a multitude that sets out each night to make inventory of the city's refuse. When you see them moving down Boulevard St. Germain they are like a column of refugees being hounded by the horrors of war. There are bare-headed old men with shaggy white beards, skinny unshaven men whose sunken eyes glow with a strange fire, long-haired youths of the special Parisian type which Victor Hugo immortalized in his *Gavroche*, women with the dilapidated features and the appearance of a harridan, aged couples each with one hand on the handle of their conveyance in matrimonial concord, who once can never have

imagined that they would ever come to push that sort of pram. The dress is in keeping with the profession: rags. There are pathetic creatures with the faces of prophets wearing a sack round their hunched shoulders and a top hat. You see baggy trousers which have been turned up because they were too long, jackets with sleeves that have been shortened with scissors, shoes which are not a pair, string in place of braces, women's garments on men and men's on women. These treasure-seekers bring their own atmosphere with them, that characteristic odour of uttermost poverty, the peculiar sweetish smell of those who never wash either themselves or their clothes. It is pungent in your nostrils as the stream goes past close beside the pavement.

You must not imagine that the rag-and-bone men fall upon the dust-bins according to the principle of first come first served. Even the jungle has its law. Each rag-and-bone man has in course of time acquired his own district, consisting of a certain number of streets and blocks of flats. Anyone who tries to maraud in another's territory will run grave risk to life and limb. You can, though, acquire by purchase the right to the bins of this or that block of flats with which the current "owner" has perhaps been unable to deal. The value of the bins is determined by the type of property. A rich block of course gives a better return than a poor, and if, for example, it includes a chemist's shop, the "owner" can count on a certain number of bottles which are readily saleable. All such things influence the quotation. The deal is made in one of Maubert's many cafés, sealed with a *coup de rouge* and punctiliously respected.

These rag-and-bone men go about their work with intelligence and the skill of practice. They have to get their examination over before the municipal dustcarts come and the contents of the bins are tipped in their stinking maws. The *chiffonier* kneels before the bin, spreads a large sack in front of him, empties the contents on to it and then does his sorting with agile fingers. What he doesn't

want goes back into the bin. The desirable, mostly cloth and paper, is loaded into the pram and off he goes to the next bin. Often he has a secret arrangement with the concierge which enables him to make his inspection in the gateway should the bins not yet have been put out on the pavement. In the twilight of dawn he makes his way back to Place Maubert. There will be lights already in some shops in Rue Maître Albert and Rue de Bièvres. These are buyers' establishments and to them he goes. His cloth and paper are weighed and valued, then at long tables they are packed and baled and sent to the textile and paper industry. Thereupon the circle is complete. From shirt to rag and back to shirt again. The working night is over (you can hardly speak of a working day in this connection) and the *chiffonier* goes to Cloches de Notre Dame to fortify himself with a glass before crawling into his lice-infested bed in the doss-house.

Such are the people of the district in which Rudolphe and his fellow students at *La Rose Jolie* were, of course, a foreign element, figures from a distant world for which the *clochard* hardly even felt any longing. In the day-time, as Rudolphe made his way along the narrow streets to his classes at the Sorbonne he would not see much of his peculiar surroundings. The *chiffoniers* were all in bed. But in the afternoons when he returned he would see them in the doorways or talking in the cafés. They liked to talk with him, telling of their good nights and bad, and talked as equals without cringing or humility. Sometimes he would be offered a glass.

On one point the *chiffonier* feels a certain solidarity with the young students, that is over their suspicious attitude to the police. The police of Paris are thoroughly decent fellows, but nonetheless, whenever there is a clash it is with their opponents that the public sides. Now and again the students of the Quartier Latin organize a demonstration: it may be about the lack of space, unpopular conditions at the university or something else. Most take

part for the fun of it, because it isn't every day you can remove the destination boards from buses and drop them in the streets with a clatter, bombard houses with ink-wells till blue streams are pouring down the bricks, jump into open cars and pull the passengers' hats down over their ears, trip up policemen and generally do things which you ought not to do. Similarly, in June when the matriculation examinations are held, the happy ones who have passed assemble round Pantheon and then stream in their thousands down into the city to give expression to their delight. They do this in so vigorous a manner that the police send numbers of cars to maintain order. Streets are cordoned off, white batons bang on students' heads, policemen are knocked out. The newspapers print long articles about "brutal and undue interference by the police". And there is no one more on the side of the turbulent young people than are *les clochards*, who regard every policeman as the embodiment of social injustice.

On warm summer evenings the people of Maubert emerge from their holes and corners and leave their haunts. Like wild animals they make their way to the river. On the lower level of Quai Montebello they fling themselves down on the gravel and rubbish, old newspaper and tins, and flat on their backs enjoy the quiet and the coolness. They lie like so many washed-up pieces of wreckage. Here and there you may discover a foreign upper-class element in the person of a student taking his siesta in the same place, for when funds will not run to two Cinzanos in Flore, Rudolphe may well take his Mimi there and sitting at her side declaim poems of his own making. That strip of beach is the slum's Deauville or Juan-les-Pins. If you shut your eyes and listen to the dirty waters of the Seine gurgling round the piles of the quay, it is not difficult to imagine that you are on a mile-long beach and that there is a blue sea to caress it. Occasionally a lorry rumbles across the bridge and disappears in the direction of the

wine market. From its dark-brown wooden barrels come rich man's smells of bordeaux and burgundy to conjure up visions of restaurant tables with dazzling napery and head-waiters in tail-coats. The gramophone music from some seventh-class doss-house becomes the promenade orchestra playing to comely beings in evening dresses and dinner-jackets. It is, though, probably mostly Mimi who dreams those dreams. Society's unfortunates lying there side by side as though they were in a concentration camp do not indulge in imaginings. They inhale the warm air in deep breaths and find it all very pleasant. They are glad just to be alive and let themselves relapse into a soft Nirvana until a twinkling star comes out above Notre-Dame. But no longer. For that star is our Lord's daily summons to all the little *chiffoniers* of Paris: *Clochard*, it's time now to get the pram out, if you're to have bread or wine tomorrow.

Rudolphe used to make a little extra reading proofs for Jacques Aubert, and it was at Aubert's that I met him. In that way Bill Stevens had become a mutual acquaintance. Rudolphe told me one day that Stevens was finding things very difficult. His job as supplementary teacher at some school or other had come to a sudden end and, being a foreigner, it was not easy to get another. Nor did people seem to want private lessons. Rudolphe did not think Stevens had any steady income whatever. Until a short time before he had lived in an unpretentious but comfortable hotel in Boulevard St. Michel. Now he had been compelled to find cheaper quarters.

"And can you imagine where he has gone? To Place Maubert! To a hotel which perhaps is not frequented by rag-and-bone men, but it's not far off.

"That I, indigent student, live in that area is one thing," Rudolphe went on in a shocked tone of voice, "but Stevens, a man with an Oxford degree, a man whose abilities we all admire . . . Suppose oneself at the age of fifty . . ."

They had bumped into each other in one of the alleyways. Stevens had seemed greyer and more worn than usual, but otherwise he seemed to be in good spirits and made no attempt to pretend he had gone there for sociological study or anything of that kind.

"The hotel is really not so bad as you might think. The vermin and the stink are a bit troublesome, of course, but it is remarkable how quickly you become inured. Or how quickly you sink," added Stevens with a self-ironical smile. "Well, I can always join the staff of *Le Clochard.*"

"And," said Rudolphe, "he then became suddenly serious and said: 'There's no need for my address to be known outside our immediate circle, is there? I am having my letters sent to a bookshop near Pantheon. This at least enables me to stay on in Paris.' "

# 7

There are a number of well-known streets in this city of Paris which retain a uniform character from the first house to the last. Avenue Foch is an example. It doesn't matter in what number you reside. The one house is as good as the other in the social scale. Champs Élysées similarly does not change character. Throughout its length it is the street of luxurious offices, large cinemas and not-quite-so-good shops. Other streets change their character. If you walk along Faubourg St. Honoré starting from the Étoile side the houses you will first pass have thoroughly uninteresting façades. At Philip St. Roule it is as though someone had touched the houses with a wand: the street suddenly blossoms out and becomes a luxurious avenue of specialist shops, where everything on sale is of the highest class and window displays are often little masterpieces of taste and refinement.

On the Left Bank, Boulevard St. Germain is the best example of an artery which thus alters its appearance, forming a chain of distinct streets though the name remains unchanged.

The first link stretches from the National Assembly and the Concorde bridge to the open square where Boulevard Raspail begins and whose chief distinguishing mark is the empty marble plinth on which some telegraphic inventor used to stand immortalized in bronze. It is a link the houses in which possess an old-fashioned solidity that almost reminds you of Berlin. Antique shops and bookshops alternate. In the large mansion flats above them live aristocrats and people of the upper middle-class, people who do not find things easy in the hard world of the 1950's, many of whom are wealthy, many more are of the new poor, but none

newly rich. There are stucco sculptures on every roof. If you tell any one of these people that you live in St. Germain you are immediately asked: what number? They know their street. They know exactly where the elegant link begins and ends.

This first stretch of the Boulevard is rather like a middle-aged, correct and formal gentleman of very good family wearing the rosette of the Légion d'honneur in his buttonhole. But in the vicinity of St. Germain-des-Près, the oldest church in Paris, it will look as though he had got into bad company. That is the quarter of the anti-social bohemians. A little farther on our gentleman will be skating on very thin ice. When the Boulevard passes Place Maubert it is in among slums where a cigarette stump thrown down will always be picked up within a few minutes. The elegant antique shops have given place to shops for simpler consumers' goods. Still farther on the poor man will seem to be seeking solace in drink, for Boulevard St. Germain comes to an end at the city's big wine market with its indefinable, individual smell. Here the houses suffer from various skin diseases. The walls are peeling and the window frames have not seen a paint brush for decades. Our gentleman of good family ends as a down-and-out.

Of the three links of Boulevard St. Germain it is the middle one, the bohemian quarter, which is the most picturesque. Its central point is the church of St. Germain-des-Près from which it takes its name. In the shadow of some plane trees Diderot keeps an eye on events from his plinth, and there is plenty happening in St. Germain-des-Près. The quarter is a vat, the effect of whose ferment and seething is felt even outside the frontiers of France. People of judgement maintain that its brew is thin; however that may be, it is there that Montparnasse has been resurrected in new guise. At the beginning of the century the bohemians sought to revolutionize the world from the heights of Montmartre. Later, they tried again, using Montparnasse as their base and Dôme, Rotonde and Cupole as their signalling stations. Now it is in St.

Germain-des-Près that the torch is being held aloft. It is in such establishments as Flore, Deux Magots and Lipp that the bombs are manufactured which now, as always, are to blow our rascally society with its antiquated ideas sky high. And which, now as always, will fail to go off.

Close to one corner of the old church stands a group of slender trees. In winter-time their stems are black and knobbly. They resemble a gathering of aged spinsters fearfully huddling close to the wall of the church to escape the onrush of heresies and all sorts of ungodliness.

From the point of view of tradition there was more than enough to justify St. Germain-des-Près becoming the new literary and artistic quarter of Paris after Hitler's war. Delacroix had his studio there in a dingy courtyard and in this his good friend Chopin installed a piano and gave musical evenings with George Sand as the guest of honour. Marat was murdered there, and there Danton lived, and it was to St. Germain-des-Près they came to fetch Camille Desmoulins to the scaffold. Racine died in Rue Visconti. It was close to his house that Balzac set up when the famous author of *Comédie Humaine* conceived the strange idea of becoming a book printer. Oscar Wilde died in the vicinity. When he was a newly-hatched poet Victor Hugo lived and wrote in Rue Dragon. In fact, in St. Germain-des-Près such memories almost have to queue. Add to this the fact that various literary personages frequented its cafés during the 'thirties and you will realize that the district had an intellectual aura long before the existentialists took possession of it.

It was a schoolmaster whose main subject was philosophy who made it intellectually fashionable. He was a small ugly man with a pipe in his mouth, who wore spectacles with lenses so thick that they made his pupils look like hazel nuts. In a café in München he would have been no different from the rest of the public. No one would have taken him for a Frenchman. This rectangular

philosopher lived in a hotel, La Lousiane, in Rue de Seine. During the war he used Café de Flore as his study, presumably because, unlike his hotel, it was heated, a peculiarity which also brought it many customers from among the young students of Quartier Latin. His name was Jean Paul Sartre, and he had invented a philosophy. Or perhaps it would be more correct to say that a very thorough study of Sören Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger had led him to a philosophy.

According to this philosophy – unlike what most thinkers from Aristotle onwards have held to be the case – it is not the spirit which precedes the matter, but the matter which precedes the spirit. Man starts his existence as a soft amorphous mass without hereditary characteristics, without purpose. Later he creates for himself a spirit through his own will. He is master of his own fate, but at the same time completely alone. If he fails, no one else but he bears the blame. Translated to a practical level this means that you are born a nothing and remain a nothing until you have made something of yourself. It was an approach to life which won the approval of many among the intellectuals of Paris. It was a proud and manly philosophy which suited the individualist who refuses to go with the herd. Sartre, the philosopher, wrote at his table in café Flore. Disciples gathered round the Master – sitting at the tables they were like schoolchildren at their desks – and the two chief disciples, Simone de Beauvois (by wicked Henri Jeanson nicknamed "La Grande Sartreuse") and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, helped him to edit the existentialist periodical *Les Temps Modernes*. The circle of disciples expanded into a court. The court grew into a literary café whose patrons called themselves existentialists but soon forgot why. Gradually, of the clarion doctrine that man was master of his fate and created his own spirit, there remained nothing but a remote caricature: you had to be as original and emancipated as possible. Sartre could not stand for long the snobbish hunt for originality when this began to become

characteristic of the patrons of Flore, and he departed with his original disciples, going on long journeys, living, when in Paris, in another part of the city, and so left Café de Flore in the power of the "existentialists".

St. Germain-des-Près, however, does not owe its new literary fame only to Jean Paul Sartre. It was partly due to a poet and not an existentialist one at that. Like the Master, he too acquired sudden fame after the war ended. Before the war Jacques Prévert had been mostly known as a skilful writer of film scenarios which were then turned into often wonderful films by Marcel Carné. His reputation, however, was confined to the film world and the general public knew nothing of him. Prévert too used to sit in Café de Flore, a small man in dark clothes, who wore a black hat pushed back on his head. His doggy eyes, always tired, gave the impression that he was on the point of falling asleep. In actual fact he was more wide awake than most. For his own amusement he used to write verse on menus, paper handkerchiefs, newspapers, whatever was at hand. These were short anti-clerical and anti-militarist songs, cruel and ironical ones about this and that, and, of course, verses about spring and love. His friends collected them and some were published under the title *Paroles*. They went straight to the heart of the poetry-loving French. No collection of verse had been printed in such large impressions since Paul Géraldy's *Toi et Moi.* Jacques Prévert's features became as well known as those of Sartre, and like him he was soon surrounded by disciples and a court. He, too, was scared away. Flore no longer saw the popular poet who used to pick up any cat that came along and have it on his knee. He hid in the south of France.

The clock of the church of St. Germain-des-Près strikes seven, and the hour of genius has come. This hour of the geniuses begins when the assistant in the butcher's shop pulls down the iron shutters, when the old dipsomaniac outside Ministère de la

Guerre cries the always amazing headlines of *Paris-Presse* and *France-Soir*, when two million modest citizens return from their places of work to their homes, there to put on slippers and dip spoons in waiting soup-plates. Naturally the hour has nothing to do with them. It is the hour of those who feel themselves called upon to turn the further progress of the world into new channels. It is the hour of *l'élite intellectuelle*; only, be it understood, not those of the élite who have already won recognition, not of the Sartres, Préverts and Simone de Beauvoirs, not of the possessors of the green tailcoat or of those whose books are not merely printed, but printed in large impressions. It is the hour of those who consider themselves chosen to tear down the old bastions, in order to open the view to new horizons of whose greatness a rotten Present is still not fully convinced.

Let us pull out our shirts so that they flap freely outside our trousers and go and have a look at Café de Flore. The geniuses are nowhere more geniuses than there. For Flore you must be fearless: wearing a tartan lumberman's shirt outside your trousers is perfectly normal there, almost conventional in fact. To do that is not enough. In the bar of the Georges V Hôtel in the avenue of that name the young dandies of Paris appear with knife-like creases in their trousers, with ties of discreet but subtle colour, in suits the cut of which suggests a good tailor in the vicinity of Place Vendôme. Flore is very nearly as conventional, only its conventions are different. A full beard is good, a moustache also not without value, but both the one and the other must have originality of shape. As to one's coiffure, it ought preferably to be on the Tarzan model, an overgrown shrubbery looking like an exotic jungle in miniature. You generally wear a woollen sweater of contrasting colour, and if it is cold, a short fur windcheater reminiscent of pictured political commissars in Soviet Russia. A so-called airman's jacket of American type also goes down well. In your corduroy trousers you have Sartre's latest sticking out of

one pocket and the newest Camus volume in the other. A glaring waistcoat, flame-coloured or crimson, will enhance the impression you make. As far as feet are concerned, it is most important not to wear shoes. Sandals are permissible, or, better still, airy *espadrilles* of the type worn in the Pyrenees. Socks are not to be recommended. However original they may be in colour or pattern, socks remain a bourgeois article of attire. Freely bared toes look more primordial. Remember, young man, that if you wish to be taken seriously in that milieu you must be different. Not different in relation to your congenial surroundings, but in relation to the Right Bank, to the backward bourgeois who do not understand that collars, ties and such attributes condemn those who wear them. The prescriptions go even further. They even include facial expression. In Georges V you can have any expression you like, as long as it isn't one that cries poverty, but in Café de Flore your eyes must mirror an interesting intellectual life. You must be consumed internally by a corrosive fear of life. You, who have looked deeper than the crowd, know that there is no cause to be cheerful. Leave the naïve smiles, the childish enthusiasms to the people of the Right Bank.

Handkerchief? No! A thousand times no! Wipe your nose on your sleeve, or don't wipe it at all. Don't forget that whatever happens, you are not as others. You are like the few, like the elect. There are separate rules for you.

The women at Café de Flore are in the same style as the men. Their savage mops are scrubby and voluminous or else they let their hair fall over their shoulders as wisps in disarray. Or in seeming disarray. The original and uninhibited is of course carefully planned. Some of these women are beautiful, but most often ugly. In the latter case they make themselves as ugly as possible, emphasizing their ugliness by various means in order by that to arrive at the antithesis of beauty which is a much sought-after thing in Café de Flore. Judging by their attire you are tempted to

believe that these young things had been fished naked out of the Seine some few hours previously, and that kindly people had supplied them with odds and ends seized in a hurry before bringing them to Flore to get something warm inside them. Their long trousers are usually a couple of sizes too large. Slender white necks protrude like sticks of asparagus from huge polo-necked sweaters or old windcheaters. There are girls with dark skins, who appear to have arrived recently from some South Sea island where they normally drink coconut milk and climb lianas with a red hibiscus flower in their hair. It is with reluctance that they have given in to the requirements of Western civilization. Their skirts and coats are as wide and floppy as possible. Their sandals are mere soles with a lace or two tied round their bronzed ankles. They huddle close to their male protectors with a primitive devotion that makes you think of Somerset Maugham's book about Gauguin and the native girls of Tahiti.

In the literary world of St. Germain-des-Près there is only one person who has the indisputable right to present a thoroughly bourgeois appearance without being branded as a bourgeois, and that is the waiter at Flore, Pascal. He really is called Pascal. And his thoughts are considered so valuable that two publishers are competing for the memoirs he has yet to write. The man with this perfect name for one working in a literary café is a thin Corsican with a skin of just that olive colour which Prosper Mérimée so excelled at describing. He is the only direct link with the café's past greatness. He served Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir and other stars who have now turned their backs on Flore. Through that fact he has also become something more than a waiter: a high priest guarding sacred relics. The finest of these relics is a table in the far corner from which the Master's thoughtful gaze used to fly right across the café and remain fixed for a few minutes on a mirror. After this preparation he would begin to write. What things had been conceived at that table! Then there is the sag in

one of the seats which gradually resulted from Simone de Beauvoir's daily visits. There is the corner seat where Prévert once in an hour of genius achieved one of his loveliest poems. He wrote it down on two pieces of lavatory paper, the only paper immediately available for him to give expression to his importunate inspiration. There are other memories too. Pascal cherishes them with all the piety they merit.

There is one last category of those who appear in the hour of genius, when the smoke hangs in clouds under the ceiling and Pascal finds it difficult to make his way between the chattering tables; it is that, if one may be permitted the word, of the rabble. The word in this connection acquires a new and surprising significance. No one would be more surprised to find it applied to themselves than that very "rabble". Its members are usually to be met at Sherry's at Rond Point, in the Ritz Bar or at Nina Ricci's shows. You will run across them in the smart bookshops with a newly bought Prix Goncourt under their arms. They are ladies who wear hats, who come in elegant furs and escorted by men correctly dressed and nervously fingering an Anthony Eden hat. They are the curious, the plutocrats "dying" to see what existentialists really look like. They look around them wide-eyed. One amazed woman who feels it best to keep a tight grip on her bag lets her jaw drop in astonishment so that her chin acquires a chinchilla beard. Another sweeps her Persian lamb closer round her with a shudder. Reactions vary and rather depend on type.

"How extraordinarily interesting!"

"*Quelle horreur!*"

"Most remarkable!"

"Gustave! Take me away from this horrible place!"

If you see the swing doors swinging with exceptional violence it will be because the Irish poet, John Milson, has made his entry.

He is a characteristic flower in this garden and worth dwelling on. Only a little "s" distinguishes his name from that of the great John Milton. As regards poetic talent the gulf is greater, for Milson is one of the very minor poets. He is said to be working on a collection of poems to be called *Vestries and Night Clubs*. His poems seem to deal partly with female psychology, and he sings, amongst other things, of his four previous marriages. The way in which he regards these marriages is not what might be called usual. They seem to have had a Strindbergian character, so long as they lasted. But afterwards, when he wrote about them, they appear in a glorified light. To use his own words: "With my old marriages it is like shoving dirty wooden pegs into a salt solution: after some time the wood starts to become covered with lovely crystals and you sit there enchanted by so much beauty." He has also invented a system of drinking in the mornings, a welcome invention in a nocturnal world where breakfast cups and saucers often clatter in shaking hands and their contents have a tendency to slop over. Milson winds a napkin into a rope which he hangs round his neck. In his left hand he clutches both the end of the napkin and the handle of his cup, then with his right hand he *hauls* the cup up to his mouth.

The inventor of the "Milson system" is a man in his fifties with a lean face on which the skin hangs in pouches. On his head he has a beret perched like the cup on an acorn. Round his thin neck dangles a red scarf and his concave torso is covered with a ragged grey jersey. Beneath his corduroy trousers bare toes peep from the straps of sandals. For Café de Flore he is entirely *comme il faut*. A look of interest and esteem comes into the eyes of the young geniuses when they see him, and the young wild women look at him with ecstatic gaze. Pascal bustles up and offers him a seat. Milson is a man who makes an impression, a poet who looks like a poet and lives as he teaches.

The strength of his position in Flore, however, is not entirely

due to the fact that he looks like a poet. He is also an entrancing talker, perhaps not so much in the literary sense as through the conviction with which he scourges the bourgeois in all its manifestations. He lumps the representatives of the bourgeois under the common heading of "idiot", and an idiot is every person with an ordered family life and clean shirt-cuffs. Between free man and the idiots is everlasting conflict by fate decreed. As he proclaims this doctrine, his severe gaze searches the café for any possible idiot who may be present and whom it can stigmatize as such. Sharp as rapiers his eyes will transfix some inquisitive woman visitor from the Right Bank, whose cheeks will begin to burn with the attention. One evening when engaged in his daily punitive expedition, he discovered a victim who really inspired him. It was winter-time. A seemingly thoroughly innocuous man in a coat with a Persian lamb collar had seated himself in one corner. He hardly looked as though he came under the category of the inquisitive. He could have been a provincial business man on a visit to the city, who had come in without any idea of the sort of place he was entering.

This poor man happened to get in the way of Milson's rapier. He was subjected to a thorough inspection. The poet's gaze roamed from the nondescript face to the Persian lamb collar and back again to the face which was beginning to look embarrassed. The hum of conversation subsided slightly. People expected a witticism and it came, uttered in a quiet tone, but perfectly audible to everybody.

"There sits a sheep in sheep's clothing!"

One evening I came into personal and not entirely pleasant contact with the author of *Vestries and Night Clubs.* Thanks to the mediation of a young artist I had been granted the honour of a place in a company whose central figure was Milson. It was not accomplished without difficulty. My appearance was against me. Milson scrutinized my painfully entire suit with obvious distaste.

Thanks to some soothing words from the artist I was allowed to sit where I was. But only on sufferance.

"Your friend may remain for the time being; but his appearance is not very prepossessing."

It was on that evening I discovered John Milson's amazing secret. When the café shut at twelve o'clock, I happened to find myself standing alone beside him on the boulevard. It was raining quite hard, and the poet had no overcoat. He made rather a pathetic figure in his ragged jersey and airy sandals. His sunken chest made him look consumptive.

"Have you far to go?" I asked.

"Quite."

"My car's just round the corner. Can I give you a lift?"

"No thanks. I like walking. Especially when it's raining."

That answer did not surprise me. It was thoroughly in keeping. I was a suspect and Milson had no desire to prolong our acquaintance unnecessarily. Nor would I have given the incident another thought, if my attention had not been caught by a strange sight. As I hurried through the rain towards Rue Jacob, I saw a thin shabby individual jump into a black Packard of the latest model which was standing on the other side of the carriage-way. The man who got into that car was John Milson. The car then drove off down the glistening asphalt with that purring opulent sound a Packard should make.

At that time I was still not altogether clear about Café de Flore. On the whole I esteemed its bohemian clientele because they were poor, genuine and amusing. There was, too, a certain charm in all that grotesqueness, an intellectual quixotism which was not without interest. To me Milson was a humbug who ought to be exposed. This view I put to my young artist friend through whom I had made his acquaintance. But what I had to tell him did not seem to make any impression.

"Pull the mask off him!" I said. "Tell your friends how the antagonist of the idiots is himself an idiot. There must be a limit even to humbug. Then it will be the end of Milson at Flore. Paradise Lost!"

"Don't be so sure of that."

"But if you explain how things really are?"

"Milson is one of the hermaphrodites at Flore. There are more of them than you would believe."

I was then told a good deal of what was concealed behind those tartan shirts and gay sweaters. "Hermaphrodites", in the sense my artist friend used the word, meant a person who actually belonged to the camp of the propertied but played at being bohemian. Milson lived in an elegant two-roomed flat in Étoile on an inherited income large enough to allow him to dispense with a job and to amuse himself as he chose. *Vestries and Night Clubs* would undoubtedly be published – at his expense. All this was not unknown to his friends at Flore, but they accepted him just as they accepted other home-made bohemians, the "hermaphrodites". There were among those existentialists youths who lived with their parents in the fashionable Avenue Henri Martin and girls belonging to rich American families who had been sent to France for an European education. In the house where I was then living I saw one evening a pale youngster standing in a corner of the gateway removing his socks and replacing his shoes with sandals. He was on his way to Flore. These "hermaphrodites" were accepted with surprising generosity by the others. Perhaps they were good to borrow money from.

They did not, however, comprise the majority, which was of another type, a strange lot altogether. What those young people really lived on no one quite knew. I wonder if they themselves were clear in their own minds about it. They sold literary news to the newspapers, borrowed, sought to obtain credit. Some had come to Paris with some sort of income or a grant given for other

purposes. Others, Scandinavians, English, Americans, came to St. Germain-des-Près with vague promises from papers in their home countries of perhaps publishing articles and interviews. In the afternoons you could see them with nervous taut faces crowding round the Poste Restante counter in the nearby post office. But it was not often that the surly post woman had any money to pay them. The girls worked in one or other of the innumerable bookshops of the Left Bank, or else they were students at the Sorbonne. They posed as models, or else just confined themselves to acting as sources of inspiration for their literary patrons. Like their male friends most of them lived in the small hotels of the quarter, moving from one to the other and as often as not leaving unpaid accounts behind them. The geniuses lived as the birds of the air; yet each day seemed to bring some financial miracle to save their dinners and aperitifs at Flore. They were undeniably existentialists – in the profane sense that they could exist at all.

They all had the one thing in common: far-flung ambitions, daring projects. They were in the course of writing great novels, great essays, great film scenarios. The word "great" should really be replaced by "greatest". They did not just aim high, but right at the very top. It was the greatest novel and the greatest essay on which they were working. Some composed poems which, like their other works, would probably never make acquaintance with printer's ink. But nothing would put them off. When day broke, light would still be filtering through the shutters of their rooms; and, in summer-time, when windows stood open, you would hear the clatter of hundreds of typewriters.

Without themselves realizing it they were of course out-and-out snobs where clothes were concerned, far more consummate than the society women of Mayfair life Michael Arlen used to portray with such expert skill after the Kaiser's war. Yet for all their snobbery there were several of these bohemians in whom there burned a flame, and one fine day perhaps that flame will

become a blaze and arouse the enthusiasm of the peoples of many lands.

The French, who are fascinated by so many surprising things, have fallen in love with a science they call spelaeology. In ordinary language this means investigating the bowels of our planet. Each spring the newspapers devote long articles to this or that spelaeological club which is equipping itself for a new expedition. This usually entails a descent into the weird crevices and caves found in the vicinity of Tarn. These expeditions are no trifles: equipped with tents, food, explosives and wireless they penetrate hundreds of yards beneath the surface of the earth to study the composition of the rocks or to search for unknown lakes and watercourses. What is even more exciting to the popular imagination is the possibility of finding remains of prehistoric people and animals, to say nothing of hidden treasure from a bygone age, or mysterious skeletons which afford glimpses of cruel and inexplicable crimes. Some of these spelaeologists stay for weeks in their cold holes and rocky halls, while journalists from all over France wait for the wireless bulletins they put out. Other spelaeologists devote themselves to investigating the miles of subterranean passages of which the historic castles of France seem to have an inexhaustible supply. They have even sent an expedition to Greenland to try and bore a hole a thousand feet deep through the eternal ice to discover whether the Ice Cap were not really a gigantic iceberg floating on a captive and unknown sea.

In St. Germain-des-Près those who so wish can indulge in literary spelaeology. Café de Flore, like its annexe Lipp and Deux Magots, lies above ground. The same is true of all the bars and small restaurants which have suddenly sprung up in the hope of profiting from the curiosity the bohemian world arouses among tourists. The world of existentialist entertainment, however, is in the main subterranean. When Flore and such places close, those

patrons whose means permit transform themselves into literary troglodytes and continue their lives deep beneath the level of the street.

Existentialist cave-life began in Rue Dauphine where Hachette has a newspaper distributing office. In the cellars of this house was a little bar where the workpeople used to fortify themselves with a *coup blanc*, while preparing the bundles of papers which the *colporteurs* would fetch when day broke. The young people of Flore got into the habit of going there too. It enabled them for a slight expenditure to continue solving the problems of life in peace and quiet, until the sun rose above the housetops and it was time to go to some *bistro* or other for morning coffee. An enterprising poetess among them – she had received a Paul Valéry prize for her poems in *Revue de Poésie* – decided to start an existentialist nightclub in the cellar in question. She called it Tabou. That did not mean, however, that it was taboo to the people of the Right Bank. On the contrary all known Paris flocked to Rue Dauphine to see the geniuses throwing their wildcat girls about in violent jitterbugging. Excited musicians with glassy eyes tooted on trumpets and saxophones, ape-like figures who looked as though they had climbed out of trees to loose an African cacophony in that old wine-cellar. On the rare occasions when they took their dreadful instruments from their mouths and collapsed in order to get breath, a young poet would jump up on to the piano. He had a low forehead and coarse primitive features, and a shaggy chest was visible through his open shirt. Swinging his hairy arms in dramatic gestures this literary Neanderthaler would declaim some profound poem about life and death to an interested public. After that would come fresh jungle howls from the trumpet and saxophones, and more frenzied dancing on the diminutive floor.

It was an undoubted success. What the French call Tout-Paris thronged down the steep steps to experience its underground

sensations, sit on seats of unplaned wood and drink wine out of tumblers. Tout-Paris cannot be translated by any such expression as "Paris society". It is something more and more important than that. London has its society and so has New York, but they are different. Tout-Paris could perhaps be called a clan, a caste, an Academy of Good Taste. It consists of a few hundred representatives of art, literature, fashion, aristocracy and money, who all know each other and who often meet. The snob and playboy element is strong, but there are also worth-while people, for in Paris the rich and the successful get on with each other, perhaps because the hereditary aristocrat or fashion king can often say things as witty and produce as much *esprit* as members of the Academy and fashionable painters. With few exceptions every real success in the sphere of art, literature or music must be accepted by Tout-Paris before it can endure. In France this type of success is still remarkably dependent on the approval of the great. What debt of gratitude is not owed by painters like Braque and Picasso, such composers as Ravel and Stravinsky, authors like Proust and Giraudoux, to Tout-Paris! On the other hand this Tout-Paris is sufficiently "democratic" to permit real talent to enter its ranks however humble its origins may be. Thus its vitality is restored in very much the same way as the British aristocracy keeps itself going, by infusion of fresh blood through the elevation of deserving members from wider classes of society. If the Comtesse de Noailles should take it into her head to launch the declaiming young Tarzan on the piano, his fortune would be made – provided, of course, that he had something in him. The same thing would happen if Christian Dior, the fashion king, eighty-year-old Lady Mendl or the millionaire Arturo Lopez Willshaw were to conceive the same idea. It would not be long before the appearance of that young man had changed completely. His shaggy chest would be covered with a well-cut dress-shirt, his hair smell of a discreet perfume, his poems would be

published in numbered limited editions printed on the finest rice paper, and you would see in *Vogue* a photograph of him on his way to the exclusive Bals des Oiseaux. But can you get a membership ticket for Tout-Paris without being artist or author, fashion king or aristocrat, for instance by just being a rich wholesaler or such a one's widow, and into the bargain neither witty nor funny? Such candidates have very meagre chances. It is, too, a problem that deprives many of the rich of Paris, especially the rich foreigners, of their sleep. There is no limit to the efforts, the intrigues, the contacting and the pulling of strings which goes on with that end in view. The energy expended on this, if transferred to something useful, might well be able to raise the standard of living of the entire French people.

No wonder then that Tabou was not declared taboo to Tout-Paris. Apart from all other considerations, what an advertisement in their visits! It was only the ignorant tenants of Rue Dauphine who failed to realize that this sudden invasion of hectic jazz music and other disturbances was a real event. When the delighted members of Tout-Paris emerged on to the street again it might well be to find infuriated tenants waiting at their windows to empty chamber-pots over them. Others of course realized the implication of the event all the more, those of a commercial turn of mind. The obvious thing to do was to get hold of suitable cellars. The restaurant proprietors of St. Germain-des-Près started a hue and cry after cellars; wine-barrels, wood and coal were carted out. Damp walls were painted in eccentric combinations of colour. Bars and band platforms were carpentered. They advertised for dance bands, and new ape-men swung down from their trees and came hurrying with more nickel-plated instruments of torture. Club Saint-Germain-Des-Près opened quite close to the church. It was a chamber of horrors in blue and grey with an oil painting of a woman with a red full beard as the *pièce de résistance* in its artistic decoration. Beneath the venerable theatre Vieux-

Colombier, they discovered another cellar stuffed with old scenery and other rubbish. Out with the junk and in with the jazz! Within a short time the nightclub Vieux-Colombier opened its rough-hewn doors and the protagonists of jitterbug had another few square yards of dance floor at their disposal.

A well-known compère of the French wireless discovered yet another serviceable cellar in Rue Prés-aux-Clercs. Some weeks later a cellar-cabaret, Thomas d'Aquin, came into being with a stage consisting of a case for brandy bottles turned upon end, and there they scourged the celebrities of Paris with a hail of witticisms and sallies which the victims applauded boisterously. Leo Férret, that gifted troubadour, who used to sing such entrancing songs about how Ile St. Louis grew tired of lying in the same place and went off on a trip down the Seine, also wanted to start a cellar-cabaret, but he was too late in the field. The cellars had all been taken, and he had to content himself with a place on the lower ground floor of a house in Rue Jacob. He christened his cabaret "Aux Assassins", but its quarters were only provisional. His dream was to be allowed to make a hole in the floor and build stairs down into the cellar below. You see, it had *got* to be a cellar. That was the new slogan throughout St. Germain-des-Près where hot music echoed at night through the subterranean vaults. At times the music filtered up through the grilled sewage-openings in the edge of the pavements. Passers-by must have thought that the Phantom of the Opera was giving a ball.

Other troglodytes came to St. Germain-des-Près, tribes of a different type, who confessed other ideals, and between their various caves war broke out.

The existentialists declared that man starts as a nothing out of nothing. It is a question of a "*départ à zero*". The newborn human being has no link with past traditions or previous civilizations. This denial of all tradition-tied culture called forth strong protests

from a number of persons who in the exercise of their professions were directly engaged in keeping cultural traditions alive. A couple of Academicians, two keepers of the Louvre, an archivist and several librarians decided to start a counter-movement which was to combat and check the existentialists and their attempts to demolish culture. That was the origin of the *perennists*, sworn enemies of the existentialists, who take their name from the Latin word *perennis*. The perennists considered that they ought to carry the war over into the enemy's camp, so they too went hunting a cellar and they actually found one beneath a café which called itself Mefisto on the corner of Boulevard St. Germain and Rue de Seine. In this perennists' grotto things went on that would have made an existentialist blush with shame could he have been forced to take part in them: folk dances in national costume, storytelling in dialect, folk songs and square dancing. The men wore the rosette of the Légion d'honneur in their buttonholes, the women hats! The place of jitterbug was taken by civilized dancing, that of the apprehensive poems of the Flore poets by lectures on French cathedral architecture. The perennists became what they wished to be – the antipole of the existentialists. That their opponents laughed till they choked, the perennists pretended not to see. They just clenched their teeth and stepped their graceful minuets to the strains of Mozart.

But what can Mozart do when there are saxophones wailing in the vicinity? The perennist warriors had to confess that youth was not with them, at least not the youth they wished to convert. It was not the long-haired geniuses and their tigress-like girl friends who attended the meetings in Mefisto's underworld, but cook-generals with a religious inclination and girls from the provinces who lacked acquaintances. Nor was much of a stir created by the challenging contents of the movement's manifesto, *La Manifeste du Mouvement Perenniste*. At Club Saint-Germain-des-Près they used the document to stop up rat holes, as well as

for other purposes. Youth remained bewitched and demoralized.

Literary spelaeology in St. Germain-des-Près has led to other discoveries. An American student on a chance visit to Paris had a remarkable experience in this sphere some years ago. The Paris edition of *New York Herald Tribune* for Tuesday, 22nd June, 1948, contained an account of the tragi-comic outcome of one sightseeing trip to the city's famous catacombs, which twist and twine beneath a large area of the Left Bank and which are macabrely decorated with bones from disused graveyards. When the keepers made their usual evening check of the numbers which had gone in and of those who had come out, they found to their horror that fifty people had not come back. A couple of search parties were hastily organized, and these penetrated into the dark complicated galleries and tunnels, blowing trumpets and signalling with electric torches. It took them eight hours to find the strays. A mysterious person had promised to show them something "out of the ordinary" and so enticed them away from the main party and the official guides. The idea was that they should traverse a number of closed galleries and come out at Rue St. Jacques. This mysterious person, however, soon managed to mystify himself and had then stumbled on with the others among bones and skulls unable to find either the way out or in.

The American student, who was one of those lost and terrified tourists, became involved in what was even more unpleasant. He became separated from the others in a black twisty gallery and found himself alone. Terrified, he groped his way along, trailing his hands along the damp walls. Now and again he had to jump aside to avoid nasty creatures which he could not see because of the dark but presumed to be rats. After several hours wandering hither and thither he stumbled upon some steps. He followed these and came to a mouldering low door beneath which was a strip of light.

The door yielded with much creaking, and, without knowing

it, he emerged into a cellar deep beneath a café in Rue de la Hachette called Caveau de la Terreur, because of some alleged link with the French Revolution. Tradition, in fact, has it that the cellar served as a meeting-place for Danton, Robespierre, Marat and other personages of the Revolution, at the same time as it was employed as a torture chamber for obnoxious aristocrats. The proprietor of the café had realized the advertising value of this tradition and had assembled some executioners' axes, a block and various unpleasant fetters and pincers in one corner. A placard on the street wall drew the attention of passers-by to these attractions.

It was into Le Caveau de la Terreur that the young American emerged. After his wanderings in the pitch darkness of the galleries he was at first dazzled by the light, but when his eyes had adjusted themselves he almost felt inclined to go back into the catacombs. He saw the block, the axes and the various instruments of torture. He could also see a number of people: grave, rather shabbily dressed young people of both sexes. They did not exactly look murderous, but neither did they look very prepossessing. One youth was in the middle of reading aloud from a paper on which the word "*Manifeste*" was written in large letters. He broke off when he caught sight of the newcomer.

"Save me!" panted the American in a hoarse strained voice. He was a miserable sight after his involuntary investigation of the Paris catacombs: his face dirty, clothes spattered and torn, hands black and bloody. The picture, however, seemed of no interest to the young man with the paper. He gazed suspiciously at the catacomb man.

"Are you a member?"

"For God's sake give me a glass of water!"

"I repeat my question: are you a member? You are among animalists and only members are allowed here."

It transpired that the American had burst in upon the newly formed society of animalists which had hired Le Caveau de la

Terreur for its meetings. The animalists combated both the existentialists and the perennists. According to them the tragedy of our age is due to the fact of man having forgotten what it means to live naturally. "Somewhere in the world at this moment a boy will sit playing with a Meccano without knowing the name of a single flower," the *Manifeste Animaliste* proclaims. In the movement's periodical, *Animalia*, you could read of the urgent need for mankind to rediscover nature. The American was accepted as a member – but then he did look convincingly like one who had considerable contacts with Mother Earth.

True enough, it is a masquerade that colourful world in St. Germain-des-Près with its strangely attired young people, its would-be celebrities and their desperate efforts to attract attention to themselves, its literary jargon, its existentialists, perennists, animalists and all the other "ists", its grandiloquent revolutionary atmosphere which threatens none and alters nothing. In Flore there is perpetual competition over the best get-up, the most original *frisure*, the most interesting facial expression. In Deux Magots they vie to produce the quickest retort, and smoky Rose Rouge makes it a point of honour to present the most unintelligible revue. It is a masquerade all right, and no masquerade should be taken seriously. Those who take part amuse themselves for a while and afterwards forget the jesting for something different and more important.

Yet you cannot quite dismiss St. Germain-des-Près like that. The geniuses' quarter is not without value. However grotesque and absurd it may be, the mere fact of its existence does show that Paris is alive. And it would be wrong to regard it as a post-war phenomenon. In the garden that is Paris the city's electric intensive climate has always promoted the growth of peculiar flowers. The very contempt for all tradition proclaimed by the geniuses is itself a genuine tradition of the city.

In Quai de Conti lies the venerable French Academy whose forty immortals assemble at intervals either with or without tail-coats and sword in hand. In Flore they speak of the members of the Academy with the same contempt as they would of the wax figures in Musée Grevin. The scorn and gall which is poured out over "the fossils under the cupola" are limitless. In their heart of hearts the young geniuses regard the Academy as the poor-house of St. Germain-des-Près – and an idealistic one at that. Which of these contemners of the Academy would not feel weak with joy if he ever got the chance to exchange his tartan shirt for the green tailcoat? Which of them but doesn't cherish just that very dream? For the majority it is unrealizable. But not for all. If one were to investigate the lives of the present members, one would probably find that in their uncritical youth several of them had been as eager in the hunt for originality and the search for effect as any of the existentialists, and that they had been just as scornful of the Academy and as heaven-storming in the literary quarter which was the St. Germain-des-Près of their day.

Opposite Flore is Reine Blanche, another bohemian meeting-place. There is, though, nothing regal about it, for it is just a *bistro* with a few tables in one corner. Unlike Flore, Deux Magots and Lipp, which close at midnight, Reine Blanche stays open until four o'clock in the morning, and those who cannot afford the temptations of the jazz-cellars go there instead for a glass of beer and a hard-boiled egg which they have to shell with their fingers. One of those who found the jazz-cellars too expensive for their pockets was a young man with whom I used to chat on occasion. His father, who was a chemist in some provincial town, imagined that his son was studying the humanities at the Sorbonne. Like so many others he studied life at Flore and the other cafés instead. He had a very young smooth-cheeked face of the type the Germans call *Milchgesicht*. To counteract the embarrassment of his youthful appearance my young friend framed his face

in a black beard. Judged by his clothes he looked a cross between an airman and a lumberjack. He was a man with a certain self-respect and he dressed suitably. He was never without the company of a lanky brown-skinned girl in a striped sailor's jersey, who wore a black fringe that almost reached to her eyebrows. Her mouth was red and like an open wound. She clung to him with such a look of humble admiration in her eyes as though a kindly Providence had allowed her to love a god. I could not help liking them, and also the god was pleasant to talk with. He was gifted and thought for himself. His plans for the future were of course concerned exclusively with novels and collections of verse, and he always had a bundle of closely written sheets of paper lying in front of him. Sometimes I would see him reading aloud to his girl, who would be listening with open mouth and fascinated gaze. Of the various things he had written nothing so far had been published, but he knew someone who knew a publisher, so it looked as though that problem might be solved.

"After that it's just a question of writing and writing. Having got a first book published, the ice is broken. You can go on writing then," he assured me one evening with all the implicit faith of youth. The girl nodded her agreement.

"And one fine day perhaps you'll get into the Academy."

"What an unpleasant thought! What a revolting prospect!"

"Jean *hates* the Academy," said the girl. "He says that it is a society for mutual admiration of the untalented."

"As a Frenchman and an author I cannot do otherwise than feel ashamed of that institution," said Jean.

If you regard St. Germain-des-Prés as a circular area in which the church and the literary cafés are the centre, you will discover another curious demographic fact. The bohemian centre of the circle has surroundings which are distinctly anti-bohemian. In all the streets round the church live tradition-bound artisans whose

living habits could not be more regular than they are, and who would be ashamed if they did not put by something for unforeseen eventualities every month. The representation of professions in Rue Dragon is typical: joiner, frame-maker, repairer of antiques, paper-hanger, book printer, statue caster, bookseller. During the week they keep to their poky shops, their workrooms in the gloomy courtyards or in their unmodern dwellings without sunlight or convenience. No existence could be more *petit-bourgeois* and stereotyped than that of these people. On Sundays the inhabitants of Rue Dragon swarm out of their narrow street like toothpaste out of its tube, in order to amuse themselves in the cafés which on that day are more or less abandoned by the geniuses. When evening falls they return to their holes and leave the field free again. The youth of Rue Dragon stays out a bit later. It visits nearby *bals musettes* or flirts on the benches under the trees. These young men talk with their girls in an entirely different language. They have both feet on the ground and live in happy ignorance of life's anguish and such problems. They are shockingly un-literary. Most of them have never even heard of Prévert, the St. Germain poet. And should one contrary to all expectations have read *Paroles*, the only poem in it a young man of Rue Dragon might conceivably recite to his girl would be this one – in Flore regarded as being a blunder on the poet's part:

*Trois alumettes une à une alumées dans la nuit*
*La première pour voir ton visage tout entier*
*La seconde pour voir tes yeux*
*La dernière pour voir ta bouche*
*Et l'obscurité tout entière pour me rappeler tout cela*
*En te serrant dans mes bras.*

It came about one evening in the bar Montana in Rue St. Benoit that a circle of pale bohemians could do no more. They were unable to find the words. That, as will be readily understood, was

a disagreeable discovery. In the course of several months' abstract discussion they had exhausted their vocabulary. Each phrase seemed fusty and stale. They began to have doubts of the spoken word as a means of transmitting thought. Had the time not come to give people some other method of communication? Taking it all in all was gesture perhaps not more expressive than words? Being progressives, the bohemians began to experiment. They confined the use of their mouths to sipping aperitifs and sucking cigarettes, and began an animated exchange of ideas by means of expressive gestures with arms and hands.

That was the beginning of the semaphorists . . .

And that altered nothing.

In any way at all.

# 8

When Stevens had first landed on the shores of France nearly two decades previously he had been not yet thirty. He went to France for a three weeks' holiday, landed at Rouen and the skipper of a barge which was sailing to Paris took him with him as a kind of P.G. He landed in Paris at Quai Montebello with a suitcase in his hand. In it was one shirt, some underclothes, a change of shoes, some favourite books and the first twenty pages of a novel. When, after twenty years in Paris, he moved to that appalling hotel in Place Maubert his suitcase could not have contained much more than the one shirt, some underclothes, a change of shoes and some favourite books. But no manuscript. Stevens had thought that he would write, get a good teaching job, do translations and give private English lessons. In that way he should be able to manage beautifully. After some years he realized that financially he would never make a go of it if he remained in Paris. As to writing he had quickly discovered that he lacked the main prerequisite: talent. The only teaching jobs he could get were temporary ones. Translating, too, proved a disappointment. The whole city seemed peopled with good experienced translators from French into English. It called for a tougher skin and more push than Stevens possessed to get publishers interested. And as regards private lessons: there were more teachers than pupils. The life he led was characterized by permanent insecurity and chronic financial difficulties. His relatives bombarded him with letters adjuring him to come home, but Stevens could not go. Some of them came over, visited him in his poverty, were horrified by his state and unhealthy appearance and promised to get him a good job, if only he would leave

Paris which so obviously had nothing to offer him. But he could not. They became irritated; some felt insulted. They asked him: why? Why was it so impossible for him to turn his back on his misery and return to England? Stevens had no reasonable explanation to give: it was just that he couldn't do it. Gradually they gave him up for lost, and if his name was mentioned it was with that sense of shame which attaches to the failures in a family. When the war forced him to go to London he kept his return a secret. It was just a temporary phase which would pass. Now, the war had ended and he had gone back to his beloved Paris – with worn clothes, no prospects and a room in Place Maubert.

If it had been a question of blind love, if Stevens had accepted everything in Paris indiscriminately, his behaviour would have been more understandable. One would have taken him for a naïve idiot. But it wasn't nearly as simple as that. Stevens often showed himself both critical and perspicacious in regard to the bad sides of the capital or frequent faults in the character of its inhabitants, for example egoism and miserliness. He was far from being the uncritical observer.

Was there any explanation of Stevens' behaviour? Or, what was perhaps the same thing, of Paris's secret? That secret which finds external expression in the fact that hundreds of thousands of foreigners insist on living in the city even though to do so involves sacrifice and hopeless difficulties, that a million or more tourists come there every year from every corner of the world as though it were a pilgrimage to Mecca, that of the thirty-seven million other people living elsewhere in France most are continually talking about it and secretly dreaming of being able to live there one day. What is the explanation of the attraction Paris seems to exert on everybody? No other city attracts people in the same way. The lure of Paris is a lure that defies all reason. Paris is not an employer, but a siren waving her hand invitingly. Obviously it has some quality, ingredient, whatever you like to

call it, which cannot be transported, bought, imitated, or made synthetically. People like to call this strange something "Paris atmosphere", but that of course is no explanation. It is merely to put an ambiguous label on a bottle whose contents apparently defy analysis.

However, even if quantitative analysis is impossible, we can at least determine some of the main ingredients. The first and most obvious is the Frenchman's electric, vibrant temperament which gives life and intensity to everything, whether it be good or evil, and militates against any form of stagnation. Now what is it that foreigners chiefly value in Paris? Is it the city's wonderful planning, is it its historical monuments, its artistic, theatrical, musical life, its literary activities, its entertainment? That naturally depends on individual taste and inclination, but nonetheless it is not essential to go to Paris to satisfy desires of that sort. In Rome historical monuments are grander. Compared with the Prado in Madrid the rest of the world's picture galleries are modest affairs. What city is more musical than Vienna? Is not New York the city of amusements *par excellence*? And food? In Brussels and Geneva there are restaurants of which every French gourmet speaks with reverence.

This leads to another question: is there any other city than Paris which can offer all these advantages combined? The answer is no. No other city in the world has so many facets as Paris. In Paris there is everything. The foreigner may be a pretentious and refined aesthete – he will find that he has come to a paradise. A *nouveau-riche* millionaire of the most vulgar type in search of luxury, elegance and joys of the flesh will arrive at the same conclusion. A gangster wishing a change of jungle will discover possibilities that neither New York nor London can offer. A religious seeker will find in Paris just that peace for which he is searching. There is not one wish which Paris is unable to fill.

This, of course, is linked with the rôle which Paris plays as

capital of France. No other community in the country can compete with the capital in any decisive sphere. The total, not to say dictatorial, manner in which Paris dominates the French nation is unparalleled in other European countries. It attracts everything and everyone to it. Out of fifty French authors forty-nine live in Paris (and forty-eight on the Left Bank). There are sixty or so theatres giving performances every evening with the result that there is no other real theatrical life in the country, hardly a town with a proper first-class theatre. Painters whose names are known and who also work in the provinces are rarities. Anybody with talent, ability or who is go-ahead is drawn to Paris like a moth to a flame. All the morally sub-normal go there too. When they make a new park in Bordeaux, Toulouse or any other big town in France they never say: now we are better than Paris! The capital is *hors concours*, and even the most unbridled local patriotism must be kept within the bounds of reason. They perhaps say: "Now we have beaten Lyons," or "Marseilles has nothing like that to show," but in such a connection the capital is never mentioned. This unique dominant position has given Paris a heavily charged atmosphere and its daily explosions. When all the cleverest, most gifted and most admirable, as well as the most ruthless and unscrupulous, have chosen to wrestle with each other in just this city, then its temperature is inevitably feverish. Add to this the fact that those activities are confined to a metropolis the dimensions of which are modest in comparison with those of London or New York. Lack of housing space further accentuates the pressure. This, then, should be the explanation why no other city is so intensely alive as Paris. It is also the reason why so many of the provincial towns of France, in themselves most charming, give the impression of being lifeless.

There is one obvious objection to be made: even if the Paris atmosphere is more composite than that of any other city, what pleasure does the foreigner derive from the fact? If he has come

in search of luxury, elegance and sensation then it does not matter to him whether or not there is an intellectual world as well as the one for which he is looking. And the converse: if it is the spiritual treasures of Paris which have attracted him there, surely he would appreciate the city all the more if it did not have its striking plutocratic facets. The remarkable thing about the French capital, however, is that it is this totality which makes it. Both the intellectual and the anti-intellectual, the man interested in politics and he who will "have nothing to do with it", both the man in search of the pleasures of the flesh and he who is up in arms against sinful gratification, are secretly interested in each other's worlds, if only as a subject of dispute. And what is a city without such bones of contention? It is a battery without electricity.

With this background I think there is one more observation to be made about Paris. It concerns that celebrated thing, personal liberty. Paris has the name of being the citadel of personal liberty in Europe; this is often misinterpreted by foreigners as though it meant that you can behave there like a savage, do everything that you do not dare do in your own country. There could be no greater mistake. A densely populated city like Paris needs a number of conventions which are respected by everybody, if existence is to be at all tolerable. A big city remains an artificial product in which a generally accepted code governing people's behaviour to each other is indispensable. If there is no such code, then each inhabitant, both high and low, will suffer from morosity, crabbedness and general cheerlessness. In Paris these conventions have been given a more polite, kindly and cultured form than in many other capitals. It is they which are responsible for the disarming smile on the countenance of the city. It is correct that Paris is the European stronghold of personal liberty, but that liberty does not consist in any way of absence of convention. On the contrary, on this point one and all, from *clochard* to member of the Academy, have accepted a certain constraint in the general

interest. Their liberty consists of their being able to choose, within the liberal limits those conventions delineate as regards manners and behaviour, exactly that style of living which pleases them. This goes with the city's totality, or, if you prefer it, its universality. No omnipotent government imposes a standard way of life upon the people of Paris. No group, no milieu, no world in Paris has ever succeeded in forcing its own style upon the rest of the inhabitants or been able to launch any line which causes those who will not conform to be stamped as being behind the times or outsiders. The plutocratic Paris has never given international Paris the character of the superfluous idle parasite; nor has the Left Bank been able to affix any label of barbarity on the Right. It has not been for the want of trying. But a cultural development stretching uninterruptedly over many centuries helps to keep the balance alive. The various fields of force of Paris are in an equilibrium which makes personal liberty more alive than anywhere else. For out of this equilibrium has grown that wonderful tolerance which is the city's patent of nobility. Perhaps, when it comes to it, it is just this, the cultured individual's uncontested right to be an individual, which is the secret of the "Paris atmosphere". That, perhaps, is the clue to the formula of what is in our bottle.

I discoursed on this to Aubert.

"I don't dare express an opinion about your analysis," he replied. "It is not easy for a Frenchman to see Paris with a foreigner's eyes. But it seems to me that your portrait could be applied to all Europe. To what we really mean by Europe."

Then he changed the subject.

"Stevens, you know, is going home."

"What did you say? Home to England?"

"Home to England."

"For good?"

"For good."

"Voluntarily?"

"That is more difficult to answer. Which of a man's actions can ever be called absolutely voluntary? If you ask him himself, he will assure you that it is of his own free will he is leaving Paris. I believe he might even be shocked by your doubt. For my part I am not as sure of it as he."

"It's the last thing I should ever have imagined," said I.

"Didn't you once compare Paris to a siren who waved invitingly to foreigners? Well, Stevens has come under the influence of another siren, of flesh and blood this time. And what she is inviting him into is not this city, but – hold on to your chair! – Birmingham!"

I wish it had been possible to relate that Stevens had unexpectedly been offered an excellent post with pension rights and all the rest of it and so lived happily to the end of his days in Paris. Or that he made a surprising success with a book about his own queer life. But that is not how it was. Nor can I even pretend that Stevens kept struggling on in Paris and was happy that way, which would at least be logical. But reality is not logical, whatever Aubert says. A bank clerk may spend twenty-five years at his desk, scrupulously accurate, ill paid, generally respected. Logic requires that eventually he should be pensioned off and spend the rest of his days in respectable insignificance and then be placed in a not too expensive grave with one of the vice-directors making a little speech. It can happen that, instead, the worthy automaton suddenly kicks over the traces. He embezzles and ends up in jail, leaving all who knew him gasping for breath. That Stevens should have decided to leave Paris was the one action we could never have expected of him, and it left his friends gasping for breath. What does one really know of the secrets of a man's heart?

The siren from Birmingham was an English schoolmistress in her forties who had been holidaying in Paris. How she had come

in contact with Stevens was not clear, but she had turned his life topsy-turvy. She had made a new man of him, said Aubert. And now they were going to be married. The good fairy had even got Stevens a teaching job in Birmingham. They were leaving Paris in a few days for the south of France where they were to be married and then go to London.

"She hunted him out in his jungle in Maubert with the pertinacity of a missionary seeking savages in Africa," said Aubert.

"What does she look like?"

He laughed.

"They are leaving on Friday. Come to the station and see them off. Three o'clock at Austerlitz."

On the Friday we all assembled on the platform to say farewell to the deserter. As well as Aubert and his wife, Rudolphe had come with his Mimi, the latter clutching a bouquet of violets which was to be presented to the future Mrs. Stevens. We arrived ahead of the object of our curiosity, so that when Stevens and his conquest – or conqueror – appeared at the barrier, we were able to have a good look at them while they showed their tickets. I must say that I was surprised by them both.

When a successful missionary converts little negro children in darkest Africa, the new converts usually appear in a beautiful shirt, having a Bible in one hand and, it is said, a blissful expression in their eyes. Stevens' conversion had had a similar effect. Was that our old threadbare, moth-eaten friend? Was that the poor English teacher whose face would light up like the sun whenever Aubert gave him some translating to do at one hundred francs a page? The man now waving to us was dressed with bewildering elegance. He had a brand new suit. His shirt was dazzlingly white and his shoes shone. Like the newly converted negro child he was clutching a black book, though in all probability not a Bible. The expression in his eyes was quite in keeping.

It wasn't perhaps blissful; but, remembering what we had expected, it seemed remarkably satisfied. We had been expecting to meet the gaze of a victim caught in a trap or of a convict on his way to Devil's Island.

"It looks as though he knows what he's doing!" whispered the astounded Rudolphe in such a tone that it was evident he felt aggrieved on Paris's account.

Then we turned our gaze on the woman missionary who had effected this astounding conversion. More surprise. Was this the woman who had turned bachelor Stevens' head? If only she had been a blonde, the sensual type, a woman emanating fire and passion. We would have understood that. But this siren from Birmingham was quite, quite different. She looked the type of woman that not even a Paris taxi-driver would be able to get the better of. Her ordinary unpowdered face had an energetic, strong-willed look about its thin pale lips. She gave us an entirely correct smile when we congratulated her; but it was only her mouth that smiled. Her eyes remained serious and critical. Her tweed coat and skirt revealed the contours of a thick-set body, which emphasized the self-assurance and purposefulness of her character. She was like a strict mother who had come to Paris to fetch a son home after a disastrous stay in France. When we congratulated her, she thanked us for the kindness and help we had shown to her Bill. But something inside me told me that in reality she was delighted that at last he had been rescued from our bad company. Bill is *so* enchanted with Paris, she said, and went on:

"And I can understand it so well. Paris is such a lovely city. Just think of the view from the Eiffel Tower!"

We did not dare look at Stevens. That would have been cruel.

"But he won't need to do without his dear Paris altogether . . ."

This apparently meant that, when they were in London on their way home, she was going to take him to one or two

restaurants in Soho "where they have really excellent French food". And in Birmingham there was a French society where he would be able to give lectures. And one of his prospective colleagues had translated a French book into English and would be so glad to make his acquaintance. And then he would be teaching French.

The convert stood silent while the missionary expounded this appalling programme.

"I'm sure it will all turn out splendidly," he said when she finished. But there was no irony in his voice, not even a hint of resignation. If he was acting, it was very well done.

Then the train disappeared from view.

We looked at each other in bewilderment.

"There is no limit to human stupidity," exclaimed Aubert. "Stevens is one of those queer people who cannot live anywhere but in Paris. We all know that. It is only the air of Paris which has the right amount of oxygen for him. He would rather be a beggar in Paris than king of England. And then this Birmingham woman comes here with her thirst for power and lures him into accepting material help just when things are at their most difficult. And with his sentimental English sense of duty he immediately feels it incumbent upon him to pay the abnormal price she demands: marriage and life in Birmingham. What we have just witnessed is really a shocking case of feminine blackmail, an unscrupulous exploitation of a decent man . . ."

A gleam of revolt lit up in Madame Aubert's eyes.

"How can you say anything so abominable," she protested. "What do you really know about the inner motives of all this? Nothing. What do you know of her various qualities? Nothing at all. It is your stupidity to which there is no limit! You and your logic! Why can't it be a case of real love?"

"Yes, exactly," put in Mimi eagerly. "How can we know that it isn't a case of real love? You men always have to be so intelligent

and search for solutions in every possible direction, even thoı
they are right in front of your noses."

"It is quite possible that you are both right," said I in
attempt to prevent tempers rising. "Let us assume that it is a qı
tion of a great love. But what will happen to it in the end? V
the siren from Birmingham be able to retain her advantage o
Paris?"

"That," said Madame Aubert, "is of course another questio

"Stevens belongs to Paris," said I. "No man can make a p
with mystical powers and then remove himself from their
fluence just like that. I believe that Stevens will come back. C
can't of course know when, nor in what circumstances. But
will return."

"I know! He will convert his wife in his turn and they
abandon Birmingham and settle here instead. Taken all in all, t
perhaps is what he is reckoning on!" said Mimi, who ha
captivating need to make the best of everything.