

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

In: Tomorrow. Vol. IV, No. 2, Oktober 1944, S. 42-46

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Oktober

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Homage to Paris

By KLAUS MANN

A FRENCH STATESMAN who served and prospered under many regimes — I think it was Talleyrand — was wont, as an aging man, to say to his younger friends: "I feel sorry for you. What do you know about the beauty of life? Only those who lived in Paris before the Revolution, realize and remember how enchanting this world can be."

Old people always believe that the time of their youth was more splendid than any other epoch has ever been or will be in the future. The universe, they think, becomes stale and sterile as it palls upon them. Old people are always wrong. So was Talleyrand, for that matter.

The generation that missed the gaudy orgies and rituals of the *ancien régime*, lived to witness the gigantic drama of Napoleon and the colorful periods that followed. An inspired people will always create new patterns of farce and of tragedy. After the dazzling extravaganzas of the House of Bourbon, the bloody carnival of the Revolution. After the stylish pirouettes of the rococo, the savage dance around the guillotine. Offenbach's cancons are no less enthralling than the musical preciousities of Rameau and Lully. The Paris of the Romantics — of Berlioz, Musset, and Delacroix — was as glorious and as unique as the Paris of Molière or that of Danton, or, later, that of the Impressionists.

Do we know how sweet life can be? We missed the Paris of Balzac — a city of Shakespearean dimensions: half-wilderness, half-fairy-tale palace — and the intimate Paris of Maupassant, full of subtle intrigues and romances. Zola's Paris, quivering with greed and energy, has its own massive, almost terrible greatness. What was Paris like at the time of Chopin and Georges Sand? How was the city when Baudelaire knew it, and Renoir, and Flaubert?

I am too young; I missed the Paris of Verlaine and Mallarmé, of Debussy, Dégaś, and Toulouse-Lautrec. To my generation, the iridescent charm of the *fin de siècle* seems as distant and fabulous as the lurid cabals of Catherine de Medici. The *grandes cocottes* of the late nineteenth century strike us as

no less baroque than their glamorous predecessors, the royal courtesans. No Madame Pompadour or Madame de La Vallière can have been more splendidly arrogant than *la Otero* or *la Cavalieri* — those semi-legendary characters of a sunken epoch. What authority in their gait and smile! What regal self-assurance as they receive the homages of their mustached cavaliers, at *Chez Maxim's* or the *Palais de Glace*. Is it true that the *Café de la Paix* used to resound with the tinkling laughter of those costly belles and with the guffaws of intoxicated Grand Dukes from St. Petersburg? The Russian princes, I understand, were in the habit of sipping champagne out of women's shoes; then they would present the waiter with a thousand-ruble bill, slap his face, and withdraw — roaring with merriment.

I envy my older friends. They recall having seen the Empress Eugénie walking through the Park of the Tuilleries — a fragile memento of the Second Empire's faded grandeur. They witnessed the triumphs of Sarah Bernhardt and Réjane, of Isidora Duncan, Nijinsky, and Anna Pavlova. One of my mature acquaintances bought, allegedly, a canvas by Picasso (Blue Period! very expensive now!) for sixteen francs at a street corner in Montparnasse. They knew the neurotic and brilliant Paris of Marcel Proust, and the idyllic Paris of the painter Utrillo and of the novelist Charles-Louis Philippe. It was the Paris of Anatole France — heir of Voltaire and Diderot — and the Paris of Jaurès, heir of Danton and St. Juste. This Paris was gloriously intact — not yet wounded by Kaiser Wilhelm's formidable guns, not yet exhausted by the inordinate strain of four martial years, not yet irritated by the forebodings of imminent disaster.

No doubt, the Paris of 1900 and of 1910 was a happier and more seductive city than the Paris I knew, from 1924 to 1938. The Paris I knew and loved was not quite free of perturbing features. There were scandals and crimes; there were shadows — increasing and deepening when Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933. But somehow these

sinister elements failed to affect the innermost equilibrium and rhythm of the city. The Paris I knew was glorious, in spite of all inimical forces threatening its peace and dignity from within and without.

The unique charm of the capital triumphed effortlessly over the cheap devices of its business-conscious hotel-owners, nightclub-managers, tourist agencies, guides, and showmen. Paris maintained its splendor and integrity, no matter how mean and muddled its political bosses became. Its wholesome loveliness and graceful vitality proved indestructible, up to the cursed day when the barbarians invaded the most civilized metropolis, the pride and center of the continent, the living heart of Europe.

* * *

I feel sorry for my younger friends — those who did not have the opportunity to see Paris before it was infested by the Nazi vermin. The capital may survive its present tribulation — I hope so, wholeheartedly. But, surely, its delicate face will have altered in these dismal years. Paris will have changed. I greatly fear, under the German yoke. The fiend-vastating when confronted with their inevitable ish conquerors may become even more rabidly defeat. Those who torture and stain the city, even while ruling it, are capable of making havoc of its monuments, even after they have withdrawn.

Sometimes, in my dreams, I stroll along the familiar avenues. It never happens that I go astray. Paris is not a dynamic mess like Berlin, nor is it a pompous museum like Rome. The capital of France resembles an ample garden — neatly and nicely arranged to serve the conveniences and caprices of a highly civilized family. There is an affinity, in my mind, between the words "park" and "Paris." The very name, Paris, connotes the images of statues, half-hidden among trees and bushes; of fountains, flowers, wide terraces, and coquettish pavilions. I visualize a small pond with autumn flowers massed upon its banks. The water — opalescent and a little oily — reflects the purple and yellow tints of the blooms and also the pallid faces of children toying with tiny ships. The children wear dark aprons and curious little berets. They call each other "*mon rien*," and converse with remarkable glibness. Frail and precocious, they appear sad, even when they are laughing.

My nostalgic promenade begins in one of the two famous parks, the Luxembourg or the Bois de Boulogne. When the Luxembourg is my starting

point, I have the choice among various pleasant routes to continue my tour. Either I make for the Boulevard de Montparnasse, in which case I might stop at the *Café du Dôme*, for an apéritif or two; or I pass by the Senate and descend the drowsy Rue de Tournon until I reach the Boulevard St. Germain. Is the old *Café Deux Magots* still in business? If so, I may have my drink on its terrace, with the fine view of the ancient square and the little church *St. Germain de Prés*.

Or is it preferable to leave the park through its frontal gate? In this case, I have to cross the Place Médici, and then can walk straight ahead. This broad and busy avenue is the Boulevard St. Germain. I am near the Sorbonne, in the heart of the Latin Quarter.

No matter which boulevard I pick, it will lead me in the end to the bank of the Seine River. From wherever I come, I shall be spellbound as ever by the singular panorama of the Quais and bridges, with the walls of the Louvre looming across the river and the august façade of Notre-Dame profiled against a pale, limpid sky. The two towers of the cathedral — at once squat and inspired — look like the trunks of two mighty trees — holy giants under whose protection the people of Paris safely worship the Lord.

* * *

At other times I may choose to start my wandering from the Bois de Boulogne. The residential district of Passy — peaceful and exclusive — does not attract me particularly. I am bound directly for the Triumphal Arch, the dramatic silhouette of which promises the beginning of the Champs Elysées. The most royal avenue in the world is not a street but a stream. You don't need to walk: the pavement seems to swell, to heave, to move under your feet. A gentle power carries you, as it were, from the Place de l'Étoile towards the Place de la Concorde, along the festive fronts of palace hotels, theatres, exhibition halls, luxuriant stores, bars, and restaurants. Effortlessly, you arrive at the Obelisque, the brittle center around which the vast square seems to rotate in an unending, swinging motion — transporting, like an enormous turntable, men and vehicles from the bank of the Seine to the opposite side of the circle, where the Hotel Crillon drowns in arrogant stillness.

Lingering by the Obelisque, I enjoy once again the incomparable, fourfold view: up the Champs Elysées to the distant spot where the Arc de Triomphe

appears in the silvery mist — a bold and delicate mirage; to my left, the Seine and, at the opposite end of the bridge, the stately façade of the Chamber of Deputies; to my right, the perspective through the Rue Royale, to the basilican frontage of the Madeleine Church. And when I turn around, there are the Gardens of the Tuilleries — spacious and colorful, lavishly adorned with flower beds and statues; a lovely foreground indeed for the majestic expanse of the Louvre palace.

Should I dally away my dream-time under the arcades of the Rue de Rivoli? The shops there are curiously dusty, for all their intimidating elegance. They display quaint and expensive stuff — brocaded pajamas, gaudy shirts and neckties of heavy silk, novels by Pierre Loti and the works of Edmond Rostand in prodigious fancy editions, and miniature models of the Eiffel Tower made of crystal or ivory.

I might have a respectful and affectionate glance at the statue of Saint Joan, the fragile and resilient patron-saint of a resilient and sensitive city. *Un petit bonjour, Mademoiselle Jeanne d'Arc!* I salute you, beautiful Place Vendôme — not so grand but equally enchanting, in its more intimate way, than the Concorde square. Dreamingly, I reach the Opera — a massive fortress of sumptuous bad taste and yet attractive, laden with melodious memories. Inside, on a bleak, enormous stage, they produce by turns *Le Coq d'Or* by Rimsky Korsakov and *Tannhäuser* by Richard Wagner. The sinful divertissements arranged by Madame Venus to corrupt the Saxonian knight, look as neat and innocuous as a ballet study of Degas. No doubt, when *Tannhäuser* meets his fellow-knights at the Wartburg, the diligent young ladies — the baits of Madame Venus and of Opera management — are having backstage rendezvous, in their turn, with portly, middle-aged gentlemen. The gentlemen carry white gloves and high hats. Surprisingly alert, if somewhat toilsomely, they stoop to kiss the finger tips of the ballerinas. "*Ab, comme c'est ravissant!*" whisper the asthmatic Don Juans, and the baits giggle, while their eyes become hard and glittering — dangerous little stones. "*Alors, mon choux,*" say the Venus girls, "*tu me donneras rien ce soir?*" The romantic interlude takes place in a sultry atmosphere saturated with the smells of powder, make-up, sweat, dusty wigs and costumes, Wagnerian beards, papier maché, color, mice, and a touch of Coty perfume.

But outside, at the Place de l'Opéra and on the

Boulevard des Italiens, there are tonic breezes — stronger than the exhalations of the rambling crowd and of the motor cars moving slowly, in unending caravans.

They are sluggish and without initiative. I am fast and alert. I have wings — much more powerful than these clumsy automobiles. The aim of my flight is Montmartre. There it is, all right — the fabulous district more frequently described in novels and operas, farces and tragedies, ballads and ballets, symphonies and films, than any other place in the world. At once squalid and glamorous, the Place Pigalle and the Boulevard Clichy blare and bustle with cheap music and dancing lights, conspicuous vices, inconspicuous beauties, and all kinds of primitive, gaudy spectacles. Hello, Moulin Rouge! — outdated token of metropolitan debaucheries! Nice to see you again, Cirque d'Hiver! You remind me always of Toulouse-Lautrec: that's why I am fond of you.

Moved and amused beyond words, I recognize the weather-beaten prostitutes — hello, you sturdy old girls! — the cocky gigolos, the weary barmen, and, of course, the parade of Arabian peddlers. Beautifully dressed, exotic and dignified, they still praise in guttural, barking voices their jewelry and Oriental rugs. As for their prodigious chains and bracelets, there may be suckers naïve enough to buy them for their ladies. But what about the rugs? Who is insane enough to purchase — in the street, at two o'clock in the morning! — such heavy and hideous things? In fact, I have never seen a person make, or even consider, so futile and tedious a deal. Yet the African hawkers — compelled, as it were, by relentless demons — continue doggedly to pace the Boulevard Clichy. With unflagging fervor they keep wasting their eloquence in front of the café terraces. Nobody listens to their fierce and flowery speech. Only two bourgeois matrons — from Strasbourg, I suppose — examine the tapestry with cruel, experienced hands, and then shake their heads — all inexorable contempt: "*Mais c'est beaucoup trop cher . . .*" The Arabs protest with theatrical gestures and raucous cries; but in vain: the matrons just shrug their shoulders. The unfortunate peddlers withdraw — gnashing their teeth with anger — and resume their cumbersome pilgrimage.

Adieu, Place Pigalle! I am off. In almost no time I rise to a height from which the dome of Sacré Coeur dominates and blesses the city. Mine is a

dream-view, a bird's eye: with one blissful glance I embrace the colossal width spread out in front of me. Is this Paris? This mythic monster, radiant and ravenous? Yes, there it is — breathing, smelling, roaring, smoking, scintillating; pregnant with future, charged with energies. Seen from above, the panorama of Paris resembles a fantastic landscape with gaping ravines, towering rocks, cataracts of light, whirlpools of electricity. Nay, it resembles the ocean. It resembles nothing. It is wonderful.

I want to be everywhere at once. From Sacré Coeur I leap to the Eiffel Tower; from the Trocadero to the Panthéon. Swiftly I descend to the famous vault and pay homage to the tombs of French immortality. One moment later I salute the Comédie Française: Neither the appearance nor the repertoire of the venerable institute has changed since I saw it last. The theatre bill — discreetly hidden behind a metal lattice — announces Moliere's master comedy, *Le Tartuffe*. If only I had enough time to see at least one act of the performance! But my dream journey approaches its end, alas. The colors and contours around me begin already to fade.

How do I use, most pertinently, the remaining minutes? What a shame! I have not yet greeted my favorites at the Louvre Museum. And if it's the last thing I am free to do, I must have a look at Dürer's self-portrait — the one in which he holds a thistle in his nervous, magnificent hands; and also at that stunning picture by an anonymous master from Avignon — a group of women and apostles lamenting Christ; with golden background; indescribable. Yes, and there is a cosmic vision by Tintoretto — dynamic circles, gyrating, rising, climaxing in the fiery throne from which the Lord, all radioactive glory, governs His whirling creation.

I wouldn't like to miss the Impressionists on the second floor — Manet's flute-playing boy with the red cap! Certain unforgettable faces, landscapes and still-lives by Seurat, Van Gogh, Cézanne! . . . Beware of the art galleries! — if you are in Paris and in a rush. There are too many things you might want to see: you will miss your dream-train. This romantic scene by Delacroix makes you feel like flying over to the Musée Gustave Moreau and having another glance at the decadent fantasies of that curious master. A perfect profile by Ingres reminds you of

Picasso's large women in the classical style. Why not scurry to the Rue de la Boétie? There may be new Picassos at Rosenberg's. Besides, it will be worthwhile, anyhow, to make a speedy tour along the show-windows of this extraordinary street — the Rialto of international modern art. Anything new by Rouault, Braque, Chagall? And let's exchange a hasty, cordial smile with the morbid ingénues of Marie Laurencin. Wide-eyed and anæmic, they seem always on the point of melting away with sweet nostalgia. But — more robust than one would think at first — they last, they endure, they survive . . .

How silly! — to nod to our painted friends while ignoring the living ones altogether. But this is by no means the proper hour to drop in and say Hello to French acquaintances. The only one with whom I can dare to take such liberties, is the concierge of my old hotel, in the Rue Jacob. I find Madame in her *loge*, as garrulous and well-informed as ever. Presently she plunges into one of her scandalous stories. "Do you remember the handsome young couple in apartment 702?" Madame asks me. "I had to throw them out — both, Monsieur and Mademoiselle. There was something really sinister about them. They didn't have an affair. *Pensez!* To take an apartment together, when there is nothing between them — *rien du tout, du tout, du tout!* Alors ça, vous savez, c'est trop fort! Impostors — that's what they are. This is a decent hotel, *tout-de-même* . . ."

An indignant deity, she rules in her sultry box, surrounded by an array of keys, quaint objets d'art, and nimble, elegant cats. And to think that vigilant goddesses of this type are on their posts all over the City of Paris! Cats and concierges, catty concierges, concierge-like cats — everywhere, from Auteuil to Montparnasse, from the Place de la Bastille to the suburbs.

My dream ends with a pell-mell of voluminous concierges, smiling statues, melancholy children, and cats — cats of all colors, sizes, and races; the demonic cats invoked by Charles Baudelaire; the smooth and civilized cats pampered in the boudoirs; exotic cats with wide, iridescent eyes; homely cats, unkempt cats, savage cats — a vast, flitting parade of supple miniature tigers.

Surrounded by cats, Mistinguette descends the

famous stairs of the Casino de Paris — dazzling and dried-out like a mummified peacock. The chansonniers of Montmartre are amazingly catty and irreverent when they poke fun at the supreme authorities of the Third Republic. Josephine Baker tries to look as feline as possible as she cries out her "two loves" — "*mon pays et Paris*." Lucienne Boyer keeps mewling — and how enchantingly! — "*Parlez-moi d'amour!*" while Maurice Chevalier — all straw-hat and lower lip — addresses his confession to a tiny cat he rocks tenderly in his arms: "*Paris, je t'aime . . .*"

He is not a "collaborationist," in my dream. He is not even really Maurice Chevalier, perhaps — just a young Frenchman, an average Parisian, who sings out his sensual affection and loyalty to his city. Give him a slanting cap and a saucy scarf, and he is the classical apache — rakish, hard-boiled, sexy. Give him one of the becoming capes as the Paris policemen wear them, and he will be a "*flic*" (i.e., a Parisian "cop"). I visualize him as a rebellious young proletarian from the red *faubourgs*; as a dandy from the Jockey Club; as a French sailor, as a French poilu, as a French farmer boy. He will look French in every masquerade. And there will be always the same blend of passion and nonchalance in his voice and in his attitude when he sings or hums or whistles the refrain: "*Paris, je t'aime — Je t'aime! je t'aime! — Avec ivresse — Comme une maîtresse . . . Paris, je t'aime d'amour!*"

* * *

Paris has been loved and glorified, not like a city, but like an irresistible human being. The young heroes of Stendhal and Balzac fall in love with Paris as if the capital of France were a beautiful woman. The artists and adventurers of five centuries, the plain tourists and the fastidious experts from five continents were captivated by the City of Light. Not complacent but self-assured and serene, Paris received praises and pledges in all conceivable idioms. What vast concert of laudations! — from the time of Queen Elizabeth to the time of Gertrude Stein; from Heinrich Heine to Rainer Maria Rilke; from Mozart to Gershwin and Stravinsky, from Dickens and Turgenev to James Joyce and T. S. Eliot.

Billions of words have been written to scrutinize the mystery of this vast attraction. But the simpler

a phenomenon, the more difficult it is to analyze. The charm of Paris rests on the style and rhythm of its daily life. The people of Paris have a mature and intelligent manner of taking plain, tangible things very seriously. All Parisians are remarkably competent when it comes to evaluating the qualities of love, wine, and food, the shape of a flower, a bust or a chandelier, the tints of a woman's face, the shades on a painted canvas. Every Frenchman has a streak of the peasant and also a streak of the artist.

Paris is great and lovable because it represents the perfect marriage of nature and tradition, of style and instinct, of spirit and sensuality. Hedonistic and tragic features are organically combined in the physiognomy of the French capital. Its ancient buildings and streets have witnessed more drama and violence than did the ramparts of any other European city. The French poet and patriot, Charles Péguy, is right when he calls Paris "*la ville qui a le plus souffert pour le salut temporel de l'humanité.*"

It is from a soil soaked with blood that this ravishing flower rises. Many a generation of Frenchmen had to toil and struggle to bring about this mellow grace and national refinement. The face of Paris was often stained and often bathed in tears before it could take on, and learned how to maintain, its incomparable smile — proud and gentle, sensitive and faintly absent-minded; skeptical and serene, flippant, generous, seductive, and laden with experience; profoundly versed in all kinds of human adventure, passion, and comedy.

Is it possible that so much grandeur and loveliness is doomed to become the victim of a maniacal conqueror? Paris is irreplaceable. Its destruction would inaugurate a bleak, barbaric era in Europe, and not only there. It would grieve the Lord to see His favorite city in pieces and His world deprived of one of its finest colors. The divine resentment may manifest itself in retaliatory gestures of terrific dimensions — famine and plagues, or another Flood. No doubt, Péguy articulates the vast, if somewhat nebulous, emotions of the Supreme Being when he makes Him say — in a poem, *Dieu et les Français*: "*C'est embêtant, quand il n'y aura plus ces Français, — Il y a des choses que je fais, il n'y aura plus personne pour les comprendre.*"