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MAGIC OF PARIS—I

The Ballad Of The Seine

A new series which takes readers around "the most exciting place on earth," starts with a sparkling description of the Seine, "the loveliest of French rivers." The author has captured the enchantment of that Paris which lies by the water

by H. E. BATES

IN the late summer of 1944, a few days after the liberation of Paris, I was madly jeeping about the countryside south and north of Amiens, investigating the habits and habitations of that charming flying reptile, the doodle-bug. It became necessary, after a time, to go farther southward, and then came a moment, on a Saturday evening, when I found myself on the bank of a bridgeless River Oise, gazing with some apprehension at the only transport ferry operating and consisting at that time of four petrol cans, three planks and a sheet of corrugated iron.

On this ferry was a Citroën car. In the Citroën was a lady. In the lady's hand was a bottle. And in the bottle was brandy. When by the mercy of God and much skilful navigation the ferry reached shore, the lady leapt off, waved the brandy, cheered lustily for England—in English—and proceeded to toast the King; the R.A.F., Churchill and ourselves. Fired by much excellent brandy, I confessed myself tired to death of investigating doodle-bug sites in woods and orchards and of trying to pacify tearful old ladies who still had unexploded bombs in their cabbage patches. She replied by suggesting desertion, or as near to it as now matters, and offering me the key of her Paris flat.

Here I may disillusion the reader who supposes that this story is about to develop into one of amorous intrigue by saying that she was safely accompanied by her husband. And he, by one of those strokes of odd good fortune that are so often the reward of officers skilled in the use of the third eye and other dodges not to be found in King's Regulations, proved to be the very man I was looking for. He owned a château, and the château sat on the top of the greatest doodle-bug nest—a fantastic 200 square kilometres of underground railways, garrison and stores—in all France. Into it Hitler had poured flying bombs at the rate of six to seven thousand a day.

"Stay the weekend in Paris," said this charming Englishwoman and her French husband, "and then come back and see this thing."

So I went to Paris and it was like drinking champagne after a long, cold, sobering, deadly diet of water. It was very warm and there were farm wagons plying as buses in the Champs Élysées. It was noisy everywhere and enchant-

ing girls, putting to shame those drearily earnest American Service girls who had somehow the appearance of female robots dropped from Mars, were riding about in jeeps, dressed with superb *chic* in frocks apparently made from nothing but old ribbon, a scarf and a paper bag. The air was a scintillation of joy, an absolute flowering of communal human ecstasy, as if the place were a city of butterflies. It was the most exciting place on earth.

To go to Paris at all is an experience that is always wonderful; but to go to Paris in that time, in those first weeks of liberated effervescence, in that intensely moving atmosphere of champagne and tears, was a thing never to be forgotten, possibly never to be repeated. Its colours, even now, every visit I make there, so that tears prick my eyes whenever I step out of the Gare du Nord into that curious and unique atmosphere of garlic and onions and astringent tobacco that is the perfume of Paris.

To go down to the Seine on that first hot Sunday morning was like going in search of the rarest of all your crystallized experiences of childhood and finding it undimmed and utterly unchanged. For the Seine, loveliest of French rivers, is not simply Paris. It is France. And it is not only France; it is an artery of all that is still sweet and vigorous in the body of Europe. And as I stood on the Pont Neuf—by no means a new bridge, but in fact the oldest in Paris and the subject of more masterpieces of paint than any other bridge on earth—I felt not only profoundly tranquillized but sane for the first time in five years.

Everything was as it had always been: fishermen dangling lines from bridges, painters sitting on quays under plane trees, mamas rocking children to sleep in the shade, old men sleeping on boats and benches and blocks of stone, lovers making that interesting and enchanting species of public love that is Paris's own speciality; the sky, the light, the gentleness of water, the grave beauty of the Île de la Cité and Notre Dame. All had achieved an astonishing triumph over a cataclysm of disillusionment and bitterness.

I do not know how many times I have stood on the Pont Neuf since then; perhaps a dozen or more. But the same emotion, the same pleasure and the same tranquillity always return. Inevitably, too, comes the feeling of standing between two worlds. For the Seine



Love's Old

THE Seine flows into Paris at Bercy where the city's wine is stored in the huge warehouses. A French song tells us that the river is "Oh so drunk at the recollection of Bercy."

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOHN PHILLIPS



The Touch Of An Artist

HIDDEN by an archway of Pont de la Tournelle, an invisible artist paints his picture of Notre Dame. Maybe he will sell the canvas in some café; perhaps he will cherish it in a lonely attic, hoping it will be acclaimed as a masterpiece. This bridge connects the left bank of the Seine at St. Germain with the Île St. Louis



The Cathedral He Paints

A LANGUID summer day is passing and even the water is content to idly around the weed-covered stones of the Île de la Cité. Notre Dame, which has witnessed all the violence of French history, is now old, mellow and benevolent. On the quai de la Tournelle a girl lets her hair hang over the river while her companion curls up to sleep

divides Paris into two parts more acutely than the Thames has ever divided London. To the north, that is on the right bank, lies the great area of boulevards, shops, grand cafés, tourists, prostitutes, hotels, embassies, sophistication. The great mass of the Louvre dominates the sky; the rue de Rivoli, lighted by chains of lamps at night, looks less like a street than a pier. In the Tuileries gardens summer dust blows grittily across tired flower beds, grubby and fractious children, knitting nursemaids; the world goes mad about the place de l'Opéra. Traffic whirls ferociously across the vast place de la Concorde, still more ferociously up and down the Champs Élysées.

Brandy-soaked touts pursue tourists, offering night life, low life, postcards, trips to Fontainebleau and Versailles, naturally concealing the

fact that the good, quick and efficient Paris suburban lines will transport them for a tenth, or even less, of the motor-coach fare. Here life is the life of all great cities: fast, noisy, expensive, fatiguing and brutal of impact.

On the south side, that is on the left bank, lies the Latin Quarter: another world. It never appears to me, for some reason, to be quite the world of a capital city. There clings to it, thereby perhaps giving it its charm, a certain provincialism, also at the same time of infinite antiquity and by no means *gauche*, that is in itself as immemorably part of France as Notre Dame. You have only to step off the left bank into the world of St. Germain des Prés, the boulevard St. Germain, the Luxembourg and all the maze of small streets there, with their markets and meat shops and cafés and shopping

Sweet Song

But there are other signs which show the river has finally reached the capital. On the bridge a train is nearing Montparnasse; a young couple embrace by the water's edge



They Cover The Waterfront

ON the quai d'Orleans time leads nowhere, so no one hurries. Two washer-women pause from a task that will be there again next week to refresh themselves with red wine. A Negro combs his hair. An Alsatian is led to the water

old women and drowsy church squares, to feel that you are in a world made up, at bottom, of villages linked together. The fact that this world contains the shrines and essence of all that is most fashionably advanced in French art and literature does not alter, for me at any rate, that air of its being steeped in an old and grave provincialism.

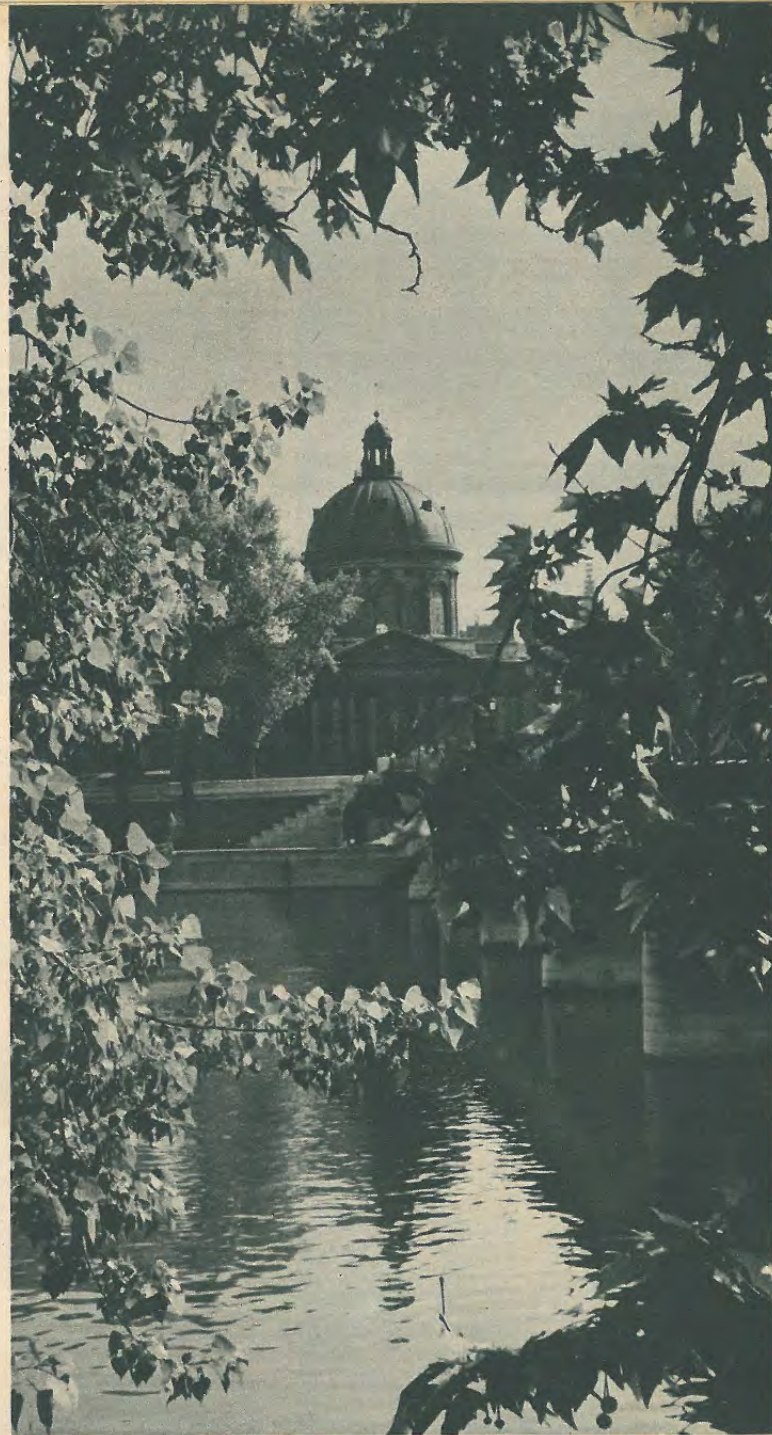
There is a street here called the rue de Seine. It is filled with butcheries and art galleries and wine-shops and junkeries, and somewhere near it, in the Café de Deux Magots or in little restaurants, the reigning high priests of Art and Letters hold court. Art and raw meat, existentialism and imperishable old ladies dispensing wine or taking the cash over antiquated provincial shop counters—such incongruities give all these crumbling narrow streets a contradictory and lusty charm that you will find, I think, nowhere else in the world.

And whenever you turn back from them there is the Seine to be crossed again. One of life's

rarer pleasures is to eat in the evening at one of the small restaurants about Notre Dame, in the place St. Michel itself or on the quai Montebello, under the cool of plane trees, and then walk back along the quietening quays, over the bridge, through the darkening courts of the Louvre and under the gas-lamps of the Tuileries gardens: not to walk quickly or all in one stretch, but slowly, with many pauses, stopping to gaze down at the slow curdling current of the river, and the great resting barges, the lovers on seats—and to relish, above all, the feeling that life, because night has fallen, does not stop and close up like a flower at sundown.

This thought inevitably brings one to the English. In the same way as it is impossible to speak of Paris without speaking of love—of which more in a moment—it is also impossible to speak for very long of the French without bringing in ourselves.

Now the essential difference between the English and the French is always held to be one



The Academy Through The Trees

THE palace of five academies, L'Institut de France, stands on the left bank. Under its massive dome it shelters the centre of a nation's literature, the Académie Française, and the academies of Belles-Lettres, Fine Arts, Sciences, and Moral Sciences and Politics

of logic. The French, we are brought up to believe, are an intensely logical people, given to clear cool processes of thought; whereas the English are muddlers, moles working by instinct, groping painfully ahead. To my mind nothing could be more wrong. The essential difference between the English and the French is that the French have grasped firmly and finally the most important single fact about life: that man is here to enjoy it only once on earth. The English, meaning all the British, too, are consumed with the earnest notion that they are here to do good, to make life better. They revel in interference; they wallow in good works.

Not for nothing, I think, are we the constant instigators of wars for freedom, the originators of trade unionism, the founders or abettors of stricter forms of nonconformism, missionizing, salvation and reform. Life, for many of the British for generations, has been so much a matter of trying to rearrange other people's lives according to a new pattern that they have



Cruising Down The River

CROWDED pleasure steamers plough up and down the Seine. The cheerful confusion on board once provoked a poet to verse which, translated, reads: "On the bateaux-mouche the bourgeois are piled up with children whose noses they blow, but don't blow enough"

forgotten what it is to enjoy the pure act of living. Quite rightly the French conclude that we take our pleasures sadly.

The French, in their simple way, understand life because they do not deny it. Life, compounded as it is of the simple ingredients of eating, drinking, sleeping, loving and procreation, is a miraculous pleasure to be enjoyed as much as possible before it is too late. Of that sensible notion Paris is the great expression.

Consequently, in Paris it is orthodox to be seen enjoying the infinite pleasure of food and drink at all hours of the day or night, indoors or out of doors, and to offer the tenderest attention to the opposite sex in public, without inhibition, if you feel like it. I do not want to imply that in Paris everybody, everywhere, is to be seen making an amorous exhibition of themselves. But it is remarkable that you can hardly walk a street's length, and certainly along the Seine not a quay-length between two bridges, without seeing a Frenchman and his

girl in the act of most tender and oblivious fondling. It happens in cafés, in restaurants, in bars, on streets, on the backs of buses, and on park benches. But above all, and with good reason, it happens on the Seine.

Because the Seine, being itself an essentially beautiful and seductive piece of water, is the inevitable background for love and all the pleasures that go with it. Under the plane trees, under the bridges, on seats, by sunlight and starlight, a quite extraordinary amount of *amour* is always in progress. It is delightful and nobody minds. It takes place in boats, too, and on those delightful Seine steamers of which I must say much more in a moment, and the essence of it is contained in those Parisian stories of Maupassant and the quintessence of it in that particular story where six young men pay such attention to a young lady that finally she does not know who is to be the father of her child. Her difficulty is ended by a miscarriage, after which she is intensely depressed by her loss.



Browning In The Sun

HERE, at the French Coney Island, Parisians gather to court the sun and each other, and sometimes swim. The authorities at Bain Deligny lay down the minimum size of costumes, but regulations are regarded with Gallic indifference

To which the six young men reply gallantly: "Never mind. We will make you another."

The steamers, which have just started again, go from the Pont Solférino, which is just beyond the place de la Concorde. Like most forms of Parisian transport they are very cheap; you can eat on board and they are very gay. A trip takes nearly three hours and goes first downstream, past the Tour Eiffel and then on beyond big fashionable blocks of flats with scarlet and auburn sun-blinds and so into a long section of river where there is always a tremendous racket of loading and unloading cement and gravel and rock on quaysides—to remind you that the Seine is not simply an idling place for painters, fishermen and lovers, but a great waterway of commerce. Barges from all over Europe come down here: stately, polished, serene, prosperous, gorgeously embellished. Theirs is a world of their own and sometimes you can see the master of one of them waiting, at noon, at his cabin table: grand as a

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water maharajah, wine bottle and glass before him, his meal about to be served. Scarlet geraniums flash in window boxes outside the cabin; washing flaps in the wind; and the barge master, king of his water world, reads his menu—I saw one doing it only a day or two ago—with as much dignity as any sea-captain navigating a 50,000-tonner.

This section of unloading barges gives place finally to that delicious area of outer Paris round St. Germain and St. Cloud. Gay trellised and terraced restaurants begin to line the waterway; you may dance in cabarets and cafés housed in old barges and houseboats. Suburbia and the countryside begin to meet in a landscape of trees and gardens. The bridges, which in their beauty and number are the wonder of central Paris, are now spread out wider on wider water. Sails curl and flash on summer afternoons. Nature in her faithful way begins to imitate art and furnishes, at every bend, a living canvas by Sisley or Renoir or Monet. The forest of St. Germain, white in spring with chestnut bloom, dark in summer, tawny-flame in autumn, rises splendid on the hills.

The excursion boats turn back before they reach St. Germain itself. The beauty of the wider Seine, so loved by Impressionist painters, is suddenly snatched away. This will not prevent you from going to St. Germain by road or train some other day and, from the great terrace there by the Palace, standing to gaze down and across at the lovely curving Seine and, beyond it, at all Paris from the Bois de Boulogne to the white towers of the Sacré Cœur on its far hill. That is one of the loveliest views of a city in the world. If you are affluent you can eat at the famous Pavillon Henri Quatre; and if you are not affluent you can drink a glass of wine at one of the little outdoor cafés under the chestnut trees and watch papa and mama and the children having their lunches and once more contemplate, all about you, down the deep chestnut avenues, the many variations of the pleasures of love.

Returning, the steamers take you down past the Pont Solférino into

that piece of Paris that is really the heart of the city, where the river divides and forms an island and Notre Dame crowns the Ile de la Cité. Lovely little gardens, shady plane trees, creepers hanging down the stone river walls—and over all of it a profound atmosphere, an oldness, a depth of beauty given by history, by human kind, by the endless passage of water. Nothing in Paris, or in France, is more beautiful than this. Just beyond it the steamers turn back, leaving for some other excursions the Seine's upper reaches, beyond Charenton, where the Impressionists also painted. You get a final glimpse of round French limbs in bright bathing costumes flashing against cool creepered stone on the narrow bathing place at the Ile de la Cité's end, and then the steamer takes you back again.

You have not seen all Paris; but you have seen its heart. Rivers, I think, may fairly be said to have sex. They are either feminine or masculine and some of them are neuter. The Seine is feminine. It seduces. And having seduced, it holds; its fascination, like its grace, is perpetual. Neither custom nor war, politics nor commerce, can stale its exceptional variety. No: not even tourists of which that peculiar species, the Travelling American Spinster, is now to be seen haunting it in numbers again. Fed on iced milk, plain salad, rye bread and sometimes, if you can believe it, water, this strange species adds yet one more touch of incongruity to this river of infinite variety. It is the antithesis of all that makes this sinuous, sensuous, amorous and deathless piece of water attractive. It hunts in pairs, is swiftly migratory in habit and makes notes of its expenses (water, free) in notebooks. It pursues its earnest, frugal course, lives its clinically clean and vitaminized day, and departs for other pastures.

And the Seine, I am sure, notes it with unperturbed tranquillity. It has, after all, been seducing men—painters, poets, novelists, politicians, historians, fishermen, loafers and just plain men—for centuries. And with success.



End Of The Ballad

THE Seine has flowed past Paris. A popular French song says that "the river is lazy as it passes by Neuilly ... Unhappy to leave her beautiful friend"

NEXT WEEK

H. E. Bates climbs to the narrow, cobbled streets of Montmartre, where at dawn two brilliant photographers focused their cameras on Bohemian Paris awakening to a new day



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