Brilliant Stars In Left Bank's Milky Way

MONTPARNASSE cafés, writes H. E. Bates, "looked as gay and overlighted as ever . . . the tables were just as full of human all-sorts." La Rotonde is one of the oldest of the Latin Quarter restaurants. Before the war three hundred paintings, all for sale, hung from the walls and its kitchens served delicious onion soup, but now it has turned *chic*, attracting the wealthier tourists, mostly American, who hope to find some remnant of the old Bohemian life. A good meal costs about £1 a head

MAGIC OF PARIS—3

Latin Quarter

Readers go across the Seine to end their picture-story tour of Paris on the Left Bank where it is gay, dignified, old, youthful, historical, studious, and sizzling with life

by H. E. BATES

PARIS, being an essentially feminine city, can also be an exhausting one. She can charm your patience and strength away. And the first aider and abetter in this business is the Paris taxi-driver, and the second what may happen to you in the taxi. Fruitless scamperings up and down the avenue de L'Opéra are nowadays accompanied either by refusals whose degree of scorn is quite unknown even to the taximen of our own capital city, or by a frenzied screeching of brakes followed instantly by the information that your intended destination is a geographical outrage quite beyond the limits of motor transport. Half an hour of this sort of thing can reduce you, in summer, to the horrible flabbiness of *sauce tartare*.

The remedy is patience and fermented liquor. Let someone else search cab-rank, station or *bistro* while you recline in hotel lounge or bar and sip that excellent traditional Paris *apéritif*, Cinzano. So long as your destination is clearly stated in the beginning, any Paris pageboy will produce a taxi in roughly the time it takes you to sip down to the last flake of ice in your vermouth. This solves one problem, but instantly admits you to the dangerous province of several others. For what is going to happen to you in the taxi, God only knows.

Having twice followed the well-tried Cinzano routine, I asked to be driven to the place St. Michel—that lively and enchanting square on the Seine that is for me, whatever others may say, the gateway to the Latin Quarter and Montparnasse. I was duly driven. On the first journey I prayed hard all the way down the avenue de L'Opéra and the rue de Rivoli. I then clutched my wife's hand all the way along the Right Bank, looked into her eyes, said I was sorry for all my shortcomings, declared it had been very nice to know her and hoped we should meet in a better world. White and shaken, I had just enough strength to pay the bill and calculate the time as something under one minute forty seconds.

The second journey, by no means lightly undertaken after the first, was quite different. Sanity prevailed until we got to the Left Bank. I then observed bearing down on us what I assumed at first to be three battalions of escaped lunatics. They turned out to be a band of wild students of both sexes. They stopped the taxi by sheer weight of numbers, rocked it madly, chanted leering slogans at us through the windows and generally, as it seemed to me, threatened to throw us into the Seine.

I had for a few minutes some impression of

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Answer Is Inside

AT the Pocket Theatre on boulevard du Montparnasse, Eugene Sue's famous play needs no shouting publicity, just a blackboard against a water pipe

OVER

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOHN PHILLIPS

The Flowers That Bloom In The . . .

EACH district of Paris holds window-display competitions. A theme is chosen and artists vie with one another in portraying it. This Left Bank florist at St. Germain-des-Prés made a tableau of a dozen different kinds of blooms, in twenty different colours. The bicycle handlebars are made up of closely arranged roses with tiny daisies adorning the ends. The fantastic plaster figure of an artist is painting a picture of gladioli. Many thousands crowd the streets of the city to see this free display of art

PARIS—continued

what it is like to be Mr. Sinatra, Mr. Peers or Colonel Lindbergh, when the taxi-driver let out a ferocious and blood-curdling yell of profanity in the brand of Parisian French that is not in the dictionary. Students faded on all sides. We drove on, feeling as if we had been hailed as Communists, baby-snatchers or just plain foreigners, and I turned in time to see the wild student body regrouping for another attack.

The incident was fruitful as reminding me of something I had forgotten. The area of the Latin Quarter, St. Germain-des-Prés and Montparnasse is largely, though by no means exclusively, the student area of Paris. Its London counterpart is Bloomsbury, but fate has been infinitely kind in bestowing on it attractions that the dim purlieus between St. Pancras and Holborn do not share. In fact you might go much further and say that this bit of Paris has everything.

It is gay; it is dignified; it is old; it is youthful; it is historical; it is studious; it still sizzles with life. It is still the literary and artistic centre of Paris; it is still the centre of all the latest spoofism in art and literature. What little Bohemianism still remains can still be found here. Blessed above all, the claws of tourism have not sunk so deep into it as into the hill of Montmartre, and in the case of most of it have not touched it really at all.

Montmartre—I forgot, by the way, to say there is a Free Republic of Montmartre, with appropriate processions and uniforms and trimmings—is largely cardboard. It is Paris's most flagrant cheap bargain in tourism. On the other hand, Montparnasse—and you can't really talk about Montparnasse without including all the area lying about the boulevard St. Germain, the boulevard St. Michel and the stretch of the Seine's left bank between Notre Dame and the Pont Neuf—is real. It lives. And it lives for a variety of reasons, not least of which, I think, is that it is a province of the Seine, and that particular section of the Seine, the Ile de la Cité, which is the true heart of Paris.

In a great revolution of re-planning during the Second Empire, Napoleon III created most of modern Paris. To him and his henchman, Baron Hausmann, Paris owes most of its great boulevards, its parks, its squares and its vistas. He drove great tunnels of imposing light through areas of eighteenth-century slums. To this era belong the boulevards St. Germain and St. Michel. I find the first staid and dull. It always reminds me of—dare I say it?—a Germanic professor. It is a long-winded lecture in brick and stone. It bores long before you can see the end of it. The boulevard St. Michel — always affectionately known as the Boul' Mich'—is on the other hand as living and stimulating as could be. It is the main artery, full of pulsating light, of the Left Bank.

Nevertheless, as I say, the place St. Michel is my gateway. I always take my first taxi there; I always eat my first dinner there. Others may disagree, but for me one of the first experiences of Paris is to sit in the Rôtisserie Périgourdine, or better still outside it, on a warm evening of spring or late summer, dally over a meal of inordinate length and excellence and gaze at the night sky gathering deep plum-purple about the towers of Notre Dame.

In case this should be thought to be mere vulgar romanticism brought on by overdoses of burgundy and duck with orange sauce—which, in fact, it often is—let me say that I even like breakfasting there. I also like lunching there. In fact I like lingering there on all possible occasions, preferably in sunshine, to eat and drink, to stare, to browse over that special kind of bookstall, contained in large padlocked boxes resting in the broad quay walls of the Seine, that only Paris knows.

From the place St. Michel can be undertaken several explorations. The Boul' Mich' is best left for night, when the long lines of street lamps flare and the big cafés are full. Daylight is best for the rich old area about the rue de Seine, with their wealth of junkery and art galleries and spoof shops and the beautiful vista of the dôme of the Institut. This delicious area is full of charm; there is a reality about its art shops that Montmartre has forgotten all about; and there is a living smack of Paris bakeries and butcheries and wine shops and side-street markets that seduces completely.

The rue de Seine leads inevitably to the jardin du Luxembourg and, by slight deviation, to the temple of the new intelligentsia, St. Germain-des-Prés. The gardens of the Luxembourg, Italian in design, and in fact some of the only Italian gardens left in Paris, make one of the Left Bank's pleasanter oases, lovely with flowers in spring. The tiny square of trees that is all St. Germain-des-Prés can offer in the way of greenery is, beside the Luxembourg, materially insignificant. But it constitutes, with its surrounding cafés, the Deux Magots, the Lipp and the Flore, a formidable, if rather phoney, temple to Art and Literature—both with the very largest

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In The Shadows

CLOSE to the bright, crowd-thronged boulevards are the seamy streets, with stucco peeling from the damp walls. In such alleys live students from many lands

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of capitals. Here indeed is the altar that has been switched from Montparnasse — where, of course, only the bourgeois, the prosperous and the *passé* paint any more —and re-erected to the deification of Picasso, Jean-Paul Sartre and various disciples. Here, in the temple of spoofism or clotism or existentialism or whatever the newest philosophy is called, cafés are made famous and exclusive by the mere appearance of a maestro ordering a stray coffee. Here the temple gods hold sway as powerful—and probably as corrupt —as the priests of Brahminism.

The Cellar Clubs

The days, as I write, are rapidly growing shorter and I will not therefore go into the tedious business of explaining what existentialism is. Put it down as the new, and the now rather superseded, literary craze: inventor, Jean-Paul Sartre. It has created great noise. As the advanced literary religion it has attracted so many disciples that the devotees of our moderate T. S. Eliot appear to be less influential than a Girl Guides' literary and discussion circle. Clubs have been founded on it. Existentialist cellar clubs, at which writers and artists make appearances and where students swing a formidable brand of *Le Hot Jazz*, are still springing up, and I look forward to the day when we shall have in London a Club Eliot, at which saxophone players who have reached matriculation standard will be able to honour our Anglo-American and very modest poet by playing some of the old sad tunes of the twenties, now so popular again in the land of his birth.

But Paris would not, of course, be Paris if it were not contemporaneously indulging in some sort of literary or artistic tight-rope walking. Yesterday these adventures took place in Montparnasse. Today these is much hard striving—too hard and too striving, I fancy—to make the area a little removed from the boulevard Montparnasse and the boulevard St. Michel the centre of the new high priesthood. To the extent of about ten per cent, I should say, it has succeeded; the rest is phoney and — alas, in the true tradition of so much that purports to be the prophecy of the newest advancement of learning—deadly, deadly dull.

Tomorrow a new spoofism, in a new district, will arise in Paris, and St. Germain-des-Prés will be as *passé* as Montparnasse now is. Youth loves disguises; and Paris, of all cities, is very youthful. If, as I now understand it, the sad-sweet tunes of the twenties are now returning to nostalgic vogue in America, it will not be long before Montparnasse is back some good distance to its rebound vogue.

Human All-sorts

Meanwhile, the three great cafés of Montparnasse's heyday, the Rotonde, the Coupole and the Select, are still there and, in my experience, as crowded as ever. They also looked as gay as ever and as over-lighted as ever. There were just as many pictures on the walls, even if the artists were not so famous, and the tables were just as full of human all-sorts as ever. It is in fact one of the special delights of Paris that any café or restaurant that has once had a great heyday never quite loses its air.

So the Coupole and the Dôme, brilliant stars in the milky way of the Left Bank, are still fun—but not such fun as they were and not half such fun, in my view, as places that flourish in an altogether different hemisphere—places like the Pavillion De L'Élysées for example, where every girl who comes in is a potential film star and a potential killer and every man a film director, and where the struggle to be noticed is so tough and bitter that the contestants are, like all true contestants, practically stripped to the waist. Never did beauty—in all shades of tan and olive and cream and white—prove so conclusively that the female of the species is more deadly than the male.

At this point a horrid thought occurs to me: that the proprietors of fashionable cafés, whether in the Élysées district or St. Germain-des-Prés, perhaps encourage their existentialist and film clientele by giving them credit or free sustenance just as the proprietor of the Rotonde did in the eighteen-nineties. For it was the Rotonde that began the Montparnasse vogue when its proprietor shrewdly divined that some of his customers painted quite well and accordingly gave them credit. When they later became famous, the Rotonde became famous too. Then Lenin and Trotsky and other designers of the Soviet Revolution came there and remained before departing to Moscow to keep an appointment arranged at least ten years before. Then came the era between the wars: the era of expatriate South Americans, Rumanians, Americans and English whose brandy-soaked swan-song has been devastatingly chronicled by Hemingway in *Fiesta*. That novel is the debauch to end all debaucheries. It was the farewell.

The Gossip Shops

I must now confess that I step off the main literary and cosmopolitan tram routes of the Left Bank with some relief. The big Paris café, with its congested terrace, whether in the Champs Élysées or the boulevards or in Montparnasse, I always find something of an ordeal. Each one is a visual and aural gossip shop. I prefer the company of side streets. Sooner or later, therefore, the big cafés of Montparnasse bore me. I begin to think of small restaurants in the area of the rue de Seine and Notre Dame. I think especially of one that overlooks the cathedral. It has been a restaurant since the seventeenth century. Its customers pore over dog-eared manuscripts. Young Parisians bring their even younger girl friends to eat at the tables under the plane trees. The roast duck with thick, succulent layers of orange sauce is cheaper, more generous and more exquisite than anywhere, perhaps, in the world.

That, for me, is the essence of the Left Bank. It lies just off the perimeter of the coteries, the new fashions, the faded fashions, the boulevards, the spoofism and the snootyism, the high temples and the cellar clubs; here people are people. It was not far from here, indeed, that a restaurant proprietor discovered my name to be Bates (always in Europe inevitably pronounced as Bâtés) and was thereby overjoyed. "You are perhaps a relation of the jockey?" he said.

When I disclaimed all connection with the gentleman from Chantilly he was disappointed but not depressed. "Anyway, in France the name of Bates is honoured," he said, and I, though not knowing one end of a horse from another, felt as if Paris had put her arms round my neck.

And long may they remain there.