The Magic Of Paris

by H. E. BATES

Two thousand years ago Paris was born. This year the gayest city in Europe is enjoying the world's biggest birthday celebrations. As the party reaches its climax ILLUSTRATED presents two views of the city—one from the pen of a great writer who toured Paris to catch her birthday mood and the other from the camera of a gifted photographer who chose one of her street corners for his theme. Their Paris picture-story begins overleaf

OVER

PARIS MAGIC —continued

"The Whole City . . . Its Art, Poetry, Music, Food, Flowers,

LAST year I came to Paris from the north, as Englishmen must nearly always do, and then from the south-west, through the ancient, elegant kingdom of châteaux and river, Touraine, with its buttery fields and its proud style of cloud-white architecture; but this year, the year Paris is 2,000 years old, I came in from the south, up the traditional post road from Lyons, through the ancient walled and battlemented towns of Sens and Auxerre and Avallon, whose heritage is as lovely as their names. Moreover, it was springtime.

Paris, as I have said in these columns before, is a fortunate city; and not the least part of her good fortune is that she possesses all about her, close at hand, a green chain of forests, of which the loveliest, in its old, wide dignity, is Fontainebleau. To come through Fontainebleau on a May morning, under the trembling, brilliant network of new beech-leaf and green-flowered hornbeam, to a chorus of nightingale song in the first hot sun of springtime, is a near approach to heaven.

That morning all Fontainebleau was in green flame. A man and his girl, out for the day from Paris, no doubt, were wandering in light-broken shade, gathering white anemones, and above them, not for one moment were the nightingales ever quiet or still.

And since Fontainebleau belongs to Paris it was not surprising that in Paris the whole city was already being infected, in its own incomparable way, with the same nervous and singing scintillation as the forest in the country. On the first platform of the Eiffel Tower a chef, in cake-tall hat, was leaning over the rails and gazing down, exactly as if over his back-garden fence, at the bursting chestnut trees below.

In the Champs-Elysées a girl of unbearable elegance and beauty, in a white dress of the subtlest simplicity and black gloves that gave her long arms the quick dark beauty of lizards, was being posed by a photographer on a cool path under candles of pink-eyed flower.

Outside a restaurant two bowler-hatted young Englishmen—Sevenoaks or Maidenhead 8.23, pin-stripes, umbrella, bowler, blood toothbrush on upper lip—were toying with the racy and unknown possibilities of the word *rognons* as if it were something of evil import; and then, having discovered from the dictionary that it meant nothing more deadly than kidneys, decided that "the omelette's bound to be pretty safe, old boy." And everywhere the girls, even the professional ones, were beginning to look more light, more fresh, more delicate, more

Women Will Try Anything Once, and she (their partner) where [illegible]
Mademoiselle adopts an air of penitence which fools no one but would melt any gendarme's heart

gazes down the rue Royale. Cafés line pavements patterned by [illegible]

Hats, Dresses And Infinite Enchantment Will Be On Show"

beautiful, exactly like leaves at Fontainebleau.

Just down the path, among the trees, two bursts of *amour* began. In Paris it is invariably a sort of acrobatic performance, for which, in the parks, two chairs are required. On these chairs a balancing act is begun and, since Paris is a wholly feminine city, it is not surprising that the aggressive party is, contrary to every nice conception, the girl. Here, at performance number one, the girl began to eat her man. You could almost hear her saying, as she leaned across and sucked with her rich, rose lips at his not unwilling brown cheeks, "Delicious, delicious, delicious," as if he were an *entrecôte* fresh from the grill.

At performance number two the girl was still the leading party, but more gentle, more subtle, more dreamy in her loving way. She only nuzzled her man, with her beautiful, pale Parisian nose, as one affectionate horse nuzzles another over a hedgerow in summertime. In these two exhibitions of acrobatic *amour*, entirely public and so typically delightful, the spring spirit of Paris in her 2,000th year of existence as the most-loved city in the world had begun: the promenaders of the Champs-Elysées taking no more notice of it than if they had seen two pairs of flitting butterflies.

It is entirely fitting that Paris should so often demonstrate her qualities in this way, and as she will no doubt go on demonstrating them, through each of her twenty districts during the four months of summer, putting the crown on the achievement of her 2,000 years' existence as a city on July 8. During this time, Paris will reveal every possible characteristic of herself, from an *Exposition à la gloire du Palais Royal* in the first district to a delightfully named affair called a *match de catch* in the twentieth; from a *soirée de Molière* and performances of religious works by Berlioz and Stravinsky to a procession of prize oxen in the main streets; from a cycle race to a *dîner de gala Second Empire*.

Its art, its poetry, its music, its literature, its religion, its hats and dresses, its cyclists, its food, its automobiles and its flowers: something of every part of its existence as a city of infinite enchantment appealing to every possible taste mankind has ever thought up, will be on show, her two great days being July 14, when the *Tour de France* on bicycles also starts, and August 25, when she celebrates her liberation.

Anyone who has ever been present on Liberation Day in Paris, or on July 14, the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille, will know something of Paris's powers of celebration. July 14 is, for example, not merely a day; it is a sort of communal disease that infects July 12, 13, 15 and 16 almost equally rabidly with its high tempera-

OVER

"London Is A Man's City, Full Of Male Shops . . . Paris I

ture and racing pulse of fun. Visitors to France are apt to discover small villages where, even a week after *le quatorze juillet* has been fairly soberly forgotten elsewhere, dancing and drinking and general joy are still going on.

I tasted the bubbling wonders of Liberation Day for the first time last year, when I helped to pack the streets of Paris about the Trocadéro and the Eiffel Tower with something like four million other people. A fabulous display of fireworks had been arranged on the Eiffel Tower and on a section of the Seine, where arrangements could hardly have been more elaborate if Cleopatra had been coming down in a barge.

The crowds milled and jostled and laughed and hooted all night, waiting for the fireworks, which duly went off, or rather some of them, about one or two o'clock in the morning. The fact that the most elaborate of them, the *pièce de résistance* in extravagant nautical style on the Seine, did not go off was, it seemed to me, typically Parisian. Nobody cared very much, except a few disgruntled spirits who had paid 2,000 francs for the privilege of sitting in the front rows, and soon everybody went off to buy another bottle of champagne, another cognac, another beer or some other kind of wetness at one or other of Paris' million bars. The failure of a few fireworks at two o'clock in the morning was just another excuse for a laugh.

What mattered was that Paris was letting itself go, as it always does on these occasions, in fine, wild communal style, with plenty of bang and plenty of leg in the air. What mattered was that she had remembered her liberation, no doubt reflecting, as she will this summer, that a city which has lived 2,000 years cannot be held very long in bond.

It always strikes me that this is in curious contrast to the British, who have already forgotten the day on which they won the war, and who now celebrate their own Festival with typical ordered pageantry, with peculiar joys of the queue, the ersatz menu and the licensing hour. At the Pleasure Gardens, for instance—this, I regret to say, is a sad little postscript to my happy visit of a week or two ago—stentorian barmen now yell in the blistering voices of sergeant-majors in their bars at the hour of closing time, exhorting the wretched customers to get out, or make menacing tours of tables outside, grabbing glasses and making threatening noises to cowed families trying to enjoy a glass of beer under the midsummer moon at a time most Parisians would be just getting warmed up for the evening. How typical!

A Pleasure Garden—if pleasure comes, can law be far behind? In Paris such barmen would be mobbed and made to suffer appropriate indignities such as having cold water dashed into their presumptuous faces. In London the cowed and beaten citizen simply walks out and consoles himself, like a child who has been caught

A Feminine City, To Which Women Look For Guidance"

misbehaving, with another ersatz ice-cream.

Or take food. The existence at London's South Bank of a couple of restaurants where a visitor may order himself something more than beef sausage or a gastronomical horror called meat loaf fritters is regarded as being something of a concession. But what happens in Paris? Apart from the 5,000 restaurants of Paris, in each of which the object of the proprietor will be to keep the customer as long as possible instead of driving him home, the fashionable seventeenth district is to put on a series of "food weeks," one of which is in the period Louis-Philippe, another of the epoch 1900. In addition there will be—in fact there already has been—*Le Grand Dîner Second Empire*, for which the tickets were five guineas, and worth, I should say, every sou of it. If you could not afford this you could dine on the first floor of the Eiffel Tower, in what I imagine would be tolerably good style, if not even terrific, in the open air, for three pound, and gaze down on the lights of the city, *en fête*, below. This was what is known as a *dîner-spectacle*, organized by *L'Union des Femmes Européenes*.

Women will, in fact, of course, have a great part in these celebrations of Paris' birthday; for if London is patently a man's city, full of male clubs, surprisingly full of male shops, built by man's devotion to commerce, Paris is equally obviously a feminine city, to which the women of the world look, like the helpless slaves they are, for some guidance as to what clothes, what hats and what perfume they should wear.

The best perfumes are still distilled in or near Paris, as is perfectly natural of a city that produces, in turn, the world's most feminine women. And, rather strangely, some of the world's most old-fashioned women: for French women have not yet, on the whole, succumbed to the repulsive habits that now characterize so many of our own women, numbers of whom look like escaped jailbirds as they smoke in the streets, with grubby scarves on their heads and trousers on the wide acres of their unsuitable lower limbs.

Paris has probably spawned more depraved women than any city in the world—though probably not—but it has certainly given birth to some of the most aristocratic and exclusive. Britain and America have tended to run a level over their women, creating a class in which shop-girl and duchess are not always distinguishable one from another. But in Paris the exclusive aristocratic woman is still exclusive. For her, as in the periods of Paris' greatest aristocracy, it is not done just to be seen around.

"Paris," said the Germans during 1940, in an attempt to get the *Haute Couture* moved to the Unter den Linden, in Berlin, "is like Athens. It does not make sense. It must be destroyed." The answer from Parisian designers was that only in Paris could they feel and keep the subtle

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touch that makes their clothes what they are—an utterly irrefutable argument, as far as I am concerned, since a city does not maintain its life as a city for 2,000 years except by being itself.

Who wants Paris to look like the Unter den Linden, or Moscow, or Manchester? Who wants her women to look like the women of Berlin, like pieces of cheese decked with ribbon and hats like shovels? Who wishes that Toulouse Lautrec, the dwarf, of whose posters and drawings Paris is fittingly holding a master exhibition during the summer's celebrations, had painted like Sargent or Munnings or Rossetti? He, above all, is the great painter of Paris, of the haunting beauty of women no longer beautiful, of sadness beneath depravity, of viciousness that weeps.

WOMEN, flowers, music, fireworks, Chopin, costume balls, tapestries, perfumes, religious celebrations, bicycle races, song, dancing, food and wine ("The wine list, sir?" a waiter in England said to me at lunch the other day, "the *wine list*?—you did say *wine list*?" as if I had wanted to order a pint of cyanide)—without wine, of course, there would be no Paris. The drinking of it is there rightly an honoured and ancient practice.

In the first century B.C. the Romans arrived and found the French already hard at it, and it always seems to me that today the wine waiter of Paris, with his traditional semi-monkish costume and its insignia of a bunch of grapes, is one of the pleasanter things the city has to offer. The celebrations, therefore, include due attention to the joy and history of France's wine—it is a most pleasant and yet slightly ironical thought that it is far better and far cheaper than the wines of those countries who were lately her and our enemies—and I do not think the citizens of Paris will need any kind of exhortation to attend that part of the city's celebrations.

They have received, however, a most fervent exhortation to make the city look as properly festive and gay as possible—"decorate your home with flowers!"—with the charming added injunction to exercise the greatest possible care to see that "pots, vases and window-boxes holding the flowers are placed so that they cannot fall into the street," an injunction that, as far as I have been able to discover, does not apply to flags.

Paris excels with flags, as it excels with wine, food, love and ladies. No one who saw Paris decorate herself for her liberation in 1944 will ever forget her flags or ever solve for himself the mystery of where all of them, including thousands of Union Jacks, came from so suddenly. In that way Paris, as in many others, retains an enchanting naïvety that used also to be part of the life of Britain fifty years ago. She has not merely not grown old; she is not inhibited or self-conscious; she is not above flags.

Similarly she has not grown too snooty for torchlight processions, of which there are to be several in various districts throughout the summer. They are so nice, too. London, I notice, does not stoop to such things: probably on the grounds that application on thirty-four different forms in triplicate would be needed to the Ministry of Fuel and Power, with appropriate reminders from local authorities on the uses of inflammable materials after dark, and a final warning from the Treasury that the raw materials in the torches were costing much-needed dollars. "Pooh!" I can hear Paris say.

And, after all, she can afford to say "Pooh!" She has been a city for a very long time, much longer than London, and the only two comparisons are Athens and Rome. She is a leader. Victor Hugo said of her: "She goes by her way alone. France follows, has to follow . . . Paris decrees an event. France, suddenly summoned, obeys."

THAT is why Paris learns nothing from London, which has in turn its own great character, its own spirit and its own beauty. That is why, while Britain celebrates a festival by another festival and a good part of her citizens start arguing whether it's quite right or if we can afford it, Paris proudly goes her own way, making a dazzling splash for her bimillenary. That is why the fireworks will go off with such a bang somewhere about the time you read these words, lighting up the Eiffel Tower, the Trocadéro, Notre Dame and the exquisite waters and bridges of the Seine. She knows that none of her rivals is 2,000 years young.

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