

BACK TO 1900 IN PARIS

A DUSTBIN MEMORIAL · OLD STAGERS · GIDE AND CLAUDEL · THE HIDDEN MICROPHONE

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By NANCY MITFORD

AN Englishman who used to live in Paris wrote to me: "Does nothing ever change there? Maison Nicolas—a story about Tristan Bernard—I had expected a new, if not a brave new world, but was taken back 20 years or more."

Well, I have known Paris 20 years or more myself, and there is very little change that I can see. The *bouquinistes* by the river; the donkeys in the Tuileries gardens; the lace blouses, in the shop on the corner of the rue Duphot, which I coveted as a child and still covet now, but which have a curious remoteness like blouses in a dream; the falling cadence of the glazier's cry as he walks the streets with a huge pane of glass on his back; Madame Bousquet's salon on Thursday; the pink electric light bulbs at Larue, rapidly diminishing, alas, as they can no longer be replaced; the flock of goats milked in the street ("But how do they pasteurise it?" an American cried in horror); George of the Ritz bar; the outside platforms of the buses; the insides of the taxis which must, one feels, be the very same that took the troops up to the Battle of the Marne; the murderous accents of telephone girls when they say "allo-jécoute—" all, all unchanged.

And one is still awoken at early dawn by the tumult and the shouting with which the contents of the *poubelles* or dustbins are collected. M. Poubelle, by the way, whose name has thus been so charmingly perpetuated, was Prefect of the Seine in the 1880s and imposed these receptacles upon the Parisian housewife to her very great and strongly expressed rage.

The plays are still mostly written by M. Guitry and M. Bernstein. Mile. Printemps and M. Jouvet are still going strong. Mme. Colette and M. Cocteau are the most promising of the young writers, and when the other day, somebody asked M. Picasso who are the new painters he replied "Moi."

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TO prove how little anything does change, the "Figaro" recently gave us a whole page of articles and advertisements from a day in January, 1900. At the theatre, "Le Bossu" in rehearsal, the name of Guitry to the fore; Folies-Bergère, Casino de Paris, and Nouveau Cirque in full swing. The advertisements are of shops and restaurants quite as well known now as then; the cartoon, by Caran d'Ache,

By Elizabeth
Six Criminal Women

Wickedness

foot, immersed himself in its copious
has explored most of it his own. He
southern half of it his own. He
HAIN there he has made the
a miracle, and in 40 years of
London burst upon him as
a young man from Lancashire.

old favourite of the French stage, first produced in 1862, has been beautifully put on (need I say) by M. Jean-Louis Barrault, to the martial strains of M. Georges Auric. It is what they call here a "melo." The Duc de Nevers is set upon by hired ruffians, "One against eight!" "No, two against eight!" cries the gallant, though obscure, Chevalier Lagardère, springing to his side. They are holding their own until Nevers is run through, treacherously from behind by a masked man in black. His infant daughter is handed through a lattice window to Lagardère, who disappears, child in one hand, sword in the other, leaving Nevers's reluctant widow to a white marriage with the boot black Prince de Gonzagues.

Fifteen years later the Prince, blacker than ever, produces a false heiress, but is catwitted by a hunchback who, having restored Nevers's real daughter, good as she is beautiful, to her grieving mother, throws off his disguise, reveals himself as the gallant though obscure Lagardère, holds his own against the Prince's hired murderers ("One against eight!" "No, two against eight!" as he is joined by a pal), kills the Prince and marries the maiden.

The speed is breathtaking, there is only one interval, lots of lovely fights, pretty ladies, handsome gentlemen, and noble sentiments. I think soon it will become a sort of Young England; already part of the audience joins in with groans, cheers, and "Attention, Lagardère!" when danger approaches, whilst another school of thought stands up and cries, "Laissez-nous donc pleurer tranquillement."

Meanwhile, it is said that various politicians here are longing to see themselves in the part of Lagardère, who shouts down his opponents in the best Chambre des Députés style, with the difference that he has a sword in his hand to emphasise his meaning.

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THOSE two most Parisian of operas, "Louise" and "Manon," are being re-dressed at the Opéra Comique, and high time too. M. Utrillo is doing "Louise" and M. Drian "Manon." "Oh, I do hope he will cheer up the *élégantes* a bit," I said, when I heard this, "they are always such a disappointment." "My dear, Presidents of the Republic come and go, but the *élégantes* of Manon have been the same for the last 50 years—and they are all members of the Communist Party."

Well, I have just been to the dress rehearsal and I can only say that M. Drian has given new life to the opera.

La ravissante Manon, in her lovely clothes, really looks like somebody "qui n'aime pas la

misère, the various stage sets are both pretty and convincing, and the *élégantes* are smashers. Here is the good old sugary Manon we have always known to take away the taste of the film.

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M. ANDRE GIDE was once asked who is the greatest French lyrical poet. His reply, "Victor Hugo, hélas," has become a classic. Recently a French schoolmaster set it as the subject for an essay, and was rather startled to find that all his pupils had written "Victor Hugo est l'as." But after all, this is only a modern way of saying the same thing.

I am very sorry that M. Gide's quarter of an hour on the radio has come to an end. The interlocutor, it is true, did most of the talking, M. Gide putting in an occasional "évidement" or "précisément ce que j'entendais," but his voice, when he did speak, was the voice of a genius, deeply impressive. In 32 sessions we were taken through his most important books, his conversion to Communism, the journey to Russia which put him against Communism, and the review of his general outlook on life in "Thésée." Now I am buried in the Gide-Claudel correspondence, which shows the two men in their real greatness. Never a petty sentiment, or any jealousy or taking offence, each helping and admiring the other wholeheartedly; until its terrible ending it was the model of a literary friendship.

Since 1926 there has been no communication between them, and the summing up each of the other is deeply characteristic:

Gide: Nous pouvons l'admettre, l'admirer, il se doit de nous vomir. Quant à moi, je préfère être vomé que vomir.

Claudel: Il y a une police nécessaire contre les empoisonneurs.

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THE other day a luncheon party was given at the Interallié, one of the smartest of Paris clubs. Several famous talkers were invited and a microphone was hidden under the table. Alas, these talkers, when their talk was played over to them, became greatly cast down; it sounded not only silly but more or less incomprehensible. The fact is that, as Balzac so truly remarked, "the upper classes in all countries use an affected jargon which contains, among the ashes of literature and philosophy, an infinitely small amount of gold."

This microphone trick is a horrible new menace, almost as cruel as the hidden photographer whose photographs of people at the Louvre appeared in THE SUNDAY TIMES a few weeks ago.

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It seems rather funny to me that "Humanité," the Communist paper, should be running Quentin Durward as a strip serial.