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He Loved Paris in the Nighttime

THE SECRET PARIS OF THE 30's. By Brassai. Translated from the French by Richard Miller. Pantheon. 186 pp. \$17.95

By EVE AUCHINCLOSS

BRASSAI IS A CHARMING old man with the enormous dark eyes of a lemur, and he has always loved the night. He was born in Transylvania at the end of the last century, and went to Paris when he was 25. Entranced, like any provincial young man, by the vigorous after-dark life of a great city, he began to keep vampire hours up at sunset, abed by dawn, and after a while got hold of a camera to record customs and activities that would be obliterated in his own lifetime.

For him, the "real" Paris existed in the lives and haunts of gangsters, whores, pimps, addicts and outcasts. He was introduced into sinister dives; like a possessed child in search of the primal scene, he knocked on strange doors after midnight and asked permission to photograph bewildered sleepers. He once climbed to a decaying attic for a view of the city; the occupants, standing in the dark in their nightgowns, said, "Go on, look . . . we don't know what it's like. We're both blind."

What he saw in the dark, or by the light of the gas lamps (which still lit much of Paris well into the '30s), is a precious record of a lost subculture. The street fairs that flowered seasonally all over the city have been driven out by traffic. The bums sleeping under the bridges who once numbered

12,000, are only 2,000 now. Les Halles is gone, shops are replaced by supermarkets, the dark alleys are demolished, the quais are superhighways. The completion of the sewer system rendered cesspools and the men who cleaned them obsolete. Morality has nearly abolished the urinals, those "tearooms" in which communicating stalls the homosexuals of Paris could cruise in anonymous darkness. The dance halls have given way to harmless dives with jukeboxes, visited by hordes of tourists. The crooks, with their regulation flat caps and cigarette stubs, have departed in new dress to the Champs-Élysées. The young prostitutes and the very streets they walked

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exist no more: the law, progress, and the sexual revolution have done them in. The fabulous grand brothels and the "slaughterhouses" too, where an ambitious girl could turn 50 tricks a night, were closed in 1946. The Saturnalian orgies of the student balls are no more than a memory; the voluptuous opium dens, with their antique Chinese pipes, have been driven out by other drugs; the big homosexual balls are a quaint memory, but in their day even the neighborhood butchers came to hold hands, blushing.

Brassai's photographs look at all these nocturnal underdogs without sentimentality or sensation. His understatement, his respect for form, his unmanipulative curiosity and sympathy, make his work original, beautiful, and moving. The clochards have antique dignity; the young toughs look out from under their caps with real menace; absorbed lovers kiss unselfconsciously in bistros, in doorways, sharing

a bench with a sleeping bum. Dance hall girls, with emblematic spit curls, cigarettes, and vulnerable painted mouths, sit with their customers—bored, angry, or flirtatious. A prostitute leans on a lamppost, jauntily defiant, dressed with a certain improvised chic in ravaged silk stockings, pleated skirt, blazer, and regal ermine scarf. Another, obscure in the dark (to which our own eyes have by now grown accustomed), is dressed for business in bedroom slippers, hat, and a coat wrapped round her naked body; a young novice looks determined but scared.

Brassai insinuates himself into their bedrooms and catches a couple from behind, she monumental on the bidet, he with suspenders dangling, tying his shoes. The madame of a house called "Suzy" shields her face from the camera like any crook, while a bevy of her naked girls, with doughy sexless bodies, laugh as the customer takes his pick.

In a Negro nightclub a chic society woman dances with a stylish young man whose white and gold teeth dazzle. The famous Kiki of Montparnasse appears at her best in a picture as beautifully composed and patterned as a Matisse, lying on her bed with two other women and three dogs, resting after a big meal. When Brassai takes an occasional picture with the people missing, their absence invokes suspense; the objects waiting for them are numinous—urinals, a shadowed lamp-lit wall. A gargoye at the top of Notre Dame, lit only by the soft glow of the city below, is of the same world as the night people—alert, battered, hopeful.

The text is almost as good as the pictures. Many writers have wanted to supply it, among them, once, Jean Renoir; but Brassai has wisely done it himself, with none of the French verbal vertigo that such pictures could readily inspire. He is observant, sensitive, exact, a student of his subject, never a sensation seeker. He has ironic little stories to tell, like that of the blind people with their attic view; or of a murderer who came to shoot him, or the "human gorilla" with an ideally beautiful little son.

Better than these vignettes are the accretions of information he squirreled away: how the cesspool cleaners worked, what sort of ordure they preferred, the dangers of their trade, their hearty repasts (with unwashed hands) after the night's noxious work; the language of the underworld, with its snobbish compulsion to invent new words, its myriad synonyms for love, kiss, intercourse, the various sexual organs, prostitute, pimp, whorehouse, madame, homosexual, police; the nature and order of prostitutes and where they worked (one street specialized in fat girls—"Nanas"—who stood motionless waiting for the butchers and tripe-sellers, "men who were accustomed to dealing with huge masses of flesh"); the brothels, "houses of illusion,"—which were big business for their owners not only gangsters but respectable families and institutions. In one of the old, grand ones, King Edward VII kept a crested four-poster, a sumptuous copper bathtub, and a "curious armchair with three seats known as 'The Indiscreet' ". To fashionable newer ones, customers brought their families and introduced their pre-pubescent sons to the mysteries of life. He is equally informative about the Folies Bergeres, the student balls, the homosexual balls and bars, the artists' dances, the opium dens—in fact, we glimpse the photographer himself just once, finally, stretched out on cushions in a golden kimono, holding a pipe. But he took only a puff or two, he tells us, then a few pictures, "discreetly," and crept away.

Later, all of French life became Brassai's subject. He was to venture out of the night and record, (for example) with the same respect, sunlit hayfields, oxen, flocks of geese, superb plow horses, and the people of whose ancient way of life these animals were an essential part. Most of them are gone now too, like the gaslights and the Nanas; some day perhaps we should have another book.

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