

The Library of America • Story of the Week

From *Americans in Paris: A Literary Anthology*

(Library of America, 2004), pages 202–10.

Headnote by Adam Gopnik.

Originally published in *A Traveler at Forty* (1913).

Theodore Dreiser

Dreiser (1871–1945), author of *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*, remains famous as the good gray elephant of American letters, a clumsy, powerful, intelligent realist—and seems therefore an odd beast to respond to quick and mercurial Paris. But this 1913 report from *A Traveler at Forty* of his first visit to the city, when he was already fully formed, shows another side of Dreiser’s talent, or, rather, shows Dreiser’s true talent: a clear eye for things as they are, even in an “exotic” setting. Dreiser was a genuine realist, who resonated to whatever was real in front of him—or perhaps Paris just lights up even the darker spirits of the American mind. He couldn’t write a graceful sentence if his life depended on it, but given that he saw so well and put down what he saw so bluntly, it never did.

A Traveler at Forty: Paris!

As we neared Paris he had built this city up so thoroughly in my mood that I am satisfied that I could not have seen it with a realistic eye if I had tried. It was something—I cannot tell you what—Napoleon, the Louvre, the art quarter, Montmartre, the gay restaurants, the boulevards, Balzac, Hugo, the Seine and the soldiery, a score and a hundred things too numerous to mention and all greatly exaggerated. I hoped to see something which was perfect in its artistic appearance—exteriorly speaking. I expected, after reading George Moore and others, a wine-like atmosphere; a throbbing world of gay life; women of exceptional charm of face and dress; the bizarre, the unique, the emotional, the spirited. At Amiens I had seen enough women entering the trains to realize that the dreary commonplace of the English woman was gone. Instead the young married women that we saw were positively daring compared to what England could show—shapely, piquant, sensitive, their eyes showing a birdlike awareness of what this world has to offer. I fancied Paris would be like that, only more so; and as I look back on it now I can honestly say that I was not greatly disappointed. It was not all that I thought it would be, but it was enough. It is a gay, brilliant, beautiful city, with the spirit of New

Are you receiving Story of the Week each week?

Sign up now at storyoftheweek.loa.org to receive our weekly alert so you won't miss a single story!

York and more than the distinction of London. It is like a brilliant, fragile child—not made for contests and brutal battles, but gay beyond reproach.

When the train rolled into the Gare du Nord it must have been about eight o'clock. Barfleur, as usual, was on the *qui vive* for precedence and advantage. He had industriously piled all the bags close to the door, and was hanging out of a window doing his best to signal a *facteur*. I was to stay in the car and hand all the packages down rapidly while he ran to secure a taxi and an inspector and in other ways to clear away the impediments to our progress. With great executive enthusiasm he told me that we must be at the Hotel Normandy by eight-fifteen or twenty and that by nine o'clock we must be ready to sit down in the Café de Paris to an excellent dinner which he had ordered by telegraph.

I recall my wonder in entering Paris—the lack of any long extended suburbs, the sudden flash of electric lights and electric cars. Mostly we seemed to be entering through a tunnel or gully, and then we were there. The noisy *facteurs* in their caps and blue jumpers were all around the cars. They ran and chattered and gesticulated—so unlike the porters in Paddington and Waterloo and Victoria and Euston. The one we finally secured, a husky little enthusiast, did his best to gather all our packages in one grand mass and shoulder them, stringing them on a single strap. The result of it was that the strap broke right over a small pool of water, and among other things the canvas bag containing my blanket and magnificent shoes fell into the water. “Oh, my God,” exclaimed Barfleur, “my hat box!”

“The fool ass,” I added, “I knew he would do just that—My blanket! My shoes!”

The excited *facteur* was fairly dancing in anguish, doing his best to get the packages strung together. Between us we relieved him of about half of them, and from about his waist he unwrapped another large strap and strung the remainder on that. Then we hurried on—for nothing would do but that we must hurry. A taxi was secured and all our luggage piled on it. It looked half suffocated under bundles as it swung out into the street, and we were off at a mad clip through crowded, electric-lighted streets. I pressed my nose to the window and took in as much as I could, while Barfleur between calculations as to how much time this would take, and that would take, and whether my trunk had arrived safely, expatiated laconically on French characteristics.

“You smell this air—it is all over Paris.”

“The taxis always go like this.” (We were going like mad.)

“There is an excellent type—look at her.”

“Now you see the chairs out in front—they are that way all over Paris.”

I was looking at the interesting restaurant life which never really seems to be interrupted anywhere in Paris. You can always find a dozen chairs somewhere, if not fifty or a hundred, out on the sidewalk under the open sky, or a glass roof—little stone-topped tables beside them, the crowd surging to and fro in front. Here you can sit and have your coffee, your liqueur, your sandwich. Everybody seems to do it—it is as common as walking in the streets.

We whirled through street after street partaking of this atmosphere, and finally swung up in front of a rather plain hotel which, I learned this same night, was close to the Avenue de l'Opéra, on the corner of the Rue St. Honoré and the Rue de l'Echelle. Our luggage was quickly distributed and I was shown into my room by a maid who could not speak English. I unlocked my belongings and was rapidly changing my clothes when Barfleur, breathing mightily, fully arrayed, appeared to say that I should await him at the door below where he would arrive with two guests. I did so, and in fifteen minutes he returned, the car spinning up out of a steady stream that was flowing by. I think my head was dizzy with the whirl of impressions which I was garnering, but I did my best to keep a sane view of things, and to get my impressions as sharp and clear as I could.

I am quite satisfied of one thing in this world, and that is that the commonest intelligence is very frequently confused or hypnotized or over-persuaded by certain situations, and that the weaker ones are ever full of the wildest forms of illusion. We talk about the sanity of life—I question whether it exists. Mostly it is a succession of confusing, disturbing impressions which are only rarely valid. This night I know I was moving in a sort of maze, and when I stepped into the car and was introduced to the two girls who were with Barfleur, I easily succumbed to what was obviously their great beauty.

The artist Greuze has painted the type that I saw before me over and over—soft, buxom, ruddy womanhood. I think the two may have been twenty-four and twenty-six. The elder was smaller than the younger—although both were of good size—and not so ruddy; but they were both perfectly plump, round-faced, dimpled, and with a wealth of brownish-black hair, even white teeth, smooth plump arms and necks and shoul-

ders. Their chins were adorably rounded, their lips red, and their eyes laughing and gay. They began laughing and chattering the moment I entered, extending their soft white hands and saying things in French which I could not understand. Barfleur was smiling—beaming through his monocle in an amused, superior way. The older girl was arrayed in pearl-colored silk with a black mantilla spangled with silver, and the younger had a dress of peach-blow hue with a white lace mantilla also spangled, and they breathed a faint perfume. We were obviously in beautiful, if not moral, company.

I shall never forget the grand air with which this noble company entered the Café de Paris. Barfleur was in fine feather and the ladies radiated a charm and a flavor which immediately attracted attention. This brilliant café was aglow with lights and alive with people. It is not large in size—quite small in fact—and triangular in shape. The charm of it comes not so much from the luxury of the fittings, which are luxurious enough, but from their exceeding good taste, and the fame of the cuisine. One does not see a bill of fare here that indicates prices. You order what you like and are charged what is suitable. Champagne is not an essential wine as it is in some restaurants—you may drink what you like. There is a delicious sparkle and spirit to the place which can only spring from a high sense of individuality. Paris is supposed to provide nothing better than the Café de Paris, in so far as food is concerned. It is as good a place to go for dinner as the city provides.

It amuses me now when I think of how the managerial ability of Barfleur had been working through all this. As the program had been arranged in his mind, I was to take the elder of the two ladies as my partner and he had reserved the younger for himself. As a matter of fact they were really equally pretty and charming—and I was interested in both until, after a few parleys and when I had exchanged a few laughing signs with the younger, he informed me that she was really closely tied up with some one else and was not available. This I really did not believe; but it did not make any particular difference. I turned my attention to the elder who was quite as vivacious, if not quite so forceful as her younger sister. I never knew what it meant before to sit in a company of this kind, welcome as a friend, looked to for gaiety as a companion and admirer, and yet not able to say a word in the language of the occasion. There were certain words which could be quickly acquired on an occasion of this kind, such as “beautiful,” “charming,” “very delightful,” and so on, for which Barfleur

gave me the French equivalent, and then I could make complimentary remarks which he would translate for all, and the ladies would say things in reply which would come to me by the same medium. It went gaily enough—for the conversation would not have been of a high order if I had been able to speak French. Barfleur objected to being used constantly as an interpreter, and when he became stubborn and chattered gaily without stopping to explain, I was compelled to fall back on the resources of looks and smiles and gestures. It interested me to see how quick these women were to adapt themselves to the difficulties of the situation. They were constantly laughing and chaffing between themselves—looking at me and saying obviously flattering things, and then laughing at my discomfort in not being able to understand. The elder explained what certain objects were by lifting them up and insisting on the French name. Barfleur was constantly telling me of the compliments they made and how sad they thought it was that I could not speak French. We departed finally for the Folies-Bergère where the newest sensation of Paris, Mistinguett, was playing. She proved to be a brilliant hoyden to look upon; a gay, slim, yellow-haired tomboy who seemed to fascinate the large audience by her boyish manners and her wayward air. There was a brilliant chorus in spangled silks and satins, and finally a beautiful maiden without any clothing at all who was cloaked by the soldiery of the stage before she had half crossed it. The vaudeville acts were about as good as they are anywhere. I did not think that the performance was any better than one might see in one or two places in New York, but of course the humor was much broader. Now and then one of their remarkable *bons mots* was translated for me by Barfleur just to give me an inkling of the character of the place. Back of the seats was a great lobby or promenade where a fragment of the demimonde of Paris was congregated—beautiful creatures, in many instances, and as unconventional as you please. I was particularly struck with the smartness of their costumes and the cheerful character of their faces. The companion type in London and New York is somewhat colder-looking. Their eyes snapped with Gallic intelligence, and they walked as though the whole world held their point of view and no other.

From here at midnight we left for the Abbaye Thélème; and there I encountered the best that Paris has to show in the way of that gaiety and color and beauty and smartness for which it is famous. One really ought to say a great deal about the Abbaye Thélème, because it is the last word, the quintessence of midnight excitement and international *savoir faire*.

The Russian and the Brazilian, the Frenchman, the American, the Englishman, the German and the Italian all meet here on common ground. I saw much of restaurant life in Paris while I was there, but nothing better than this. Like the *Café de Paris* it was small—very small—when compared to restaurants of similar repute in New York and London. I fancy it was not more than sixty feet square—only it was not square but pentagonal, almost circular. The tables, to begin with, went round the walls, with seats which had the wall for a back; and then, as the guests poured in, the interior space was filled up with tables which were brought in for the purpose; and, later in the morning, when the guests began to leave, these tables were taken out again, and the space devoted to dancing and entertainers.

As in the *Café de Paris* I noticed that it was not so much the quality of the furnishings as the spirit of the place which was important. This latter was compounded of various elements—success, perfection of service, absolute distinction of cooking, and lastly the subtlety and magnetism of sex which is capitalized and used in Paris as it is nowhere else in the world. I never actually realized until I stepped into this restaurant what it is that draws a certain moneyed element to Paris. The Tomb of Napoleon and the Panthéon and the Louvre are not the significant attractions of that important city. Those things have their value—they constitute an historical and artistic element that is appealing, romantic and forceful. But over and above that there is something else—and that is sex. I did not learn what I am going to say now until later, but it might as well be said here, for it illustrates the point exactly. A little experience and inquiry in Paris quickly taught me that the owners and managers of the more successful restaurants encourage and help to sustain a certain type of woman whose presence is desirable. She must be young, beautiful, or attractive, and above all things possessed of temperament. A woman can rise in the café and restaurant world of Paris quite as she can on the stage; and she can easily graduate from the *Abbaye Thélème* and *Maxim's* to the stage, though the path is villainous. On the other hand, the stage contributes freely to the atmosphere of *Maxim's*, the *Abbaye Thélème*, and other restaurants of their kind. A large number of the figures seen here and at the *Folies-Bergère* and other places of the same type, are interchangeable. They are in the restaurants when they are not on the stage, and they are on the stage when they are not in the restaurants. They rise or fall by a world of strange devices, and you can hear brilliant or ghastly stories illus-

trating either conclusion. Paris—this aspect of it—is a perfect maelstrom of sex; and it is sustained by the wealth and the curiosity of the stranger, as well as the Frenchman.

The Abbaye Thélème on this occasion presented a brilliant scene. The carpet, as I recall it, was a rich green velvet; the walls a lavender-white. From the ceiling six magnificently prised electroliers were suspended—three glowing with a clear peach-blow hue and three with a brilliant white. Outside a small railing near the door several negro singers, a mandolin and a guitar-player, several stage dancers, and others were congregated. A perfect storm of people was pouring through the doors—all with their tables previously arranged for. Out in the lobby, where a January wind was blowing, you could hear a wild uproar of slamming taxi doors, and the calls of doormen and chauffeurs getting their vehicles in and out of the way. The company generally, as on all such occasions, was on the *qui vive* to see who else were present and what the general spirit of the occasion was to be. Instantly I detected a number of Americans; three amazingly beautiful English women, such as I never saw in England, and their escorts; a few Spaniards or South Americans; and, after that, a variety of individuals whom I took to be largely French, although it was impossible to tell. The English women interested me because, during all my stay in Europe, I never saw three other women quite so beautiful, and because, during all my stay in England, I scarcely saw a good-looking English woman. Barfleur suggested that they were of that high realm of fashion which rarely remains in London during the winter season—when I was there; that if I came again in May or June and went to the races I would see plenty of them. Their lovely hair was straw-colored and their cheeks and foreheads a faint pink and cream. Their arms and shoulders were delightfully bare, and they carried themselves with amazing hauteur. By one o'clock, when the majority of the guests had arrived, this room fairly shimmered with white silks and satins, white arms and shoulders, roses in black hair and blue and lavender ribbons fastened about coiffures of lighter complexion. There were jewels in plenty—opals and amethysts and turquoises and rubies—and there was a perfect artillery of champagne corks. Every table was attended by its silver bucket of ice; and the mandolins and guitars in their crowded angle were strumming mightily.

I speculated interestedly as we seated ourselves as to what drew all these people from all parts of the world to see this, to be here together.

Barfleur was eager to come here first and to have me see this, without delay. I do not know where you could go, and for a hundred francs see more of really amazing feminine beauty. I do not know where for the same money you could buy the same atmosphere of lightness and gaiety and enthusiasm. This place was fairly vibrating with a wild desire to live. I fancy the majority of those who were here for the first time—particularly of the young—would tell you that they would rather be here than in any other spot you could name. The place had a peculiar glitter of beauty which was compounded by the managers with great skill. The waiters were all of them deft, swift, suave, good-looking; the dancers who stepped out on the floor after a few moments were of an orchid-like Spanish type—ruddy, brown, full-bodied, black-haired, black-eyed. They had on dresses that were as close fitting as the scales of a fish and that glittered with the same radiance. They waved and rattled and clashed castanets and tambourines and danced wildly and sinuously to and fro among the tables. Some of them sang, or voices accompanied them from the raised platform devoted to music.

After a while red, blue, pink and green balloons were introduced, anchored to the champagne bottles, and allowed to float gaily in the air. Paper parcels of small paste balls of all colors, as light as feathers, were distributed for the guests to throw at one another. In ten minutes a wild artillery battle was raging. Young girls were up on their feet, their hands full of these colored weapons, pelting the male strangers of their selection. You would see tall Englishmen and Americans exchanging a perfect volley of colored spheres with girls of various nationalities, laughing, chattering, calling, screaming. The cocotte in all her dazzling radiance was here—exquisitely dressed, her white arms shimmering, perfectly willing to strike up an understanding with the admirer who was pelting her.

After a time, when the audience had worn itself through fever and frenzy to satisfaction or weariness, or both, a few of the tables were cleared away and the dancing began, occasional guests joining. There were charming dances in costume from Russia, from Scotland, from Hungary, and from Spain. I had the wonder of seeing an American girl rise from her table and dance with more skill and grace than the employed talent. A wine-enthused Englishman took the floor, a handsome youth of twenty-six or eight, and remained there gaily prancing about from table to table, dancing alone or with whomsoever would welcome him. What looked like a dangerous argument started at one time because some high-mettled

Brazilian considered that he had been insulted. A cordon of waiters and the managers soon adjusted that. It was between three and four in the morning when we finally left; and I was very tired.

It was decided that we should meet for dinner; and since it was almost daylight I was glad when we had seen our ladies to their apartment and returned to the hotel.