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*Le ciel
de Paris*



PLACE de la Concorde. In one of the fine buildings designed and built by Gabriel is a club — the Automobile Club de France. It is a perfectly ordinary club like so many others, with comfortable old armchairs and a reading room where the only noise permitted is the turning of pages. But the Automobile Club has one big advantage over the other less fortunate clubs — it looks out onto the most beautiful square in Paris. To the left, one sees the grey statuary amid the greenery of the Tuileries Gardens; to the right, the long line of foliage of the Champs-Élysées, and opposite, the shimmering ribbon of the Seine. And overhead the sky, no ordinary sky — but the sky of Paris.

On these summer mornings towards noon, it is a blue grey flecked with white. Like every other sky at this

time of year, you will say. But you are mistaken, it possesses a translucence all its own, unlike — quite unlike — that of any other sky in the world.

* * *

Admittedly there is the bright blue sky of the Côte d'Azur above the pink stucco houses, a sky with a strange density, of a consistency that almost makes one feel one could cut it with a knife. A sky all the same colour, almost too uniform, of rather an inane violence, enough to drive painters to despair. The sky of the Esterel is quietly smug. The sky of Paris is gently ironic, a trifle uncertain.

Then there is the sky of the Atlantic coast with — even in fine weather — its gently rolling big white clouds tinged with mauve, clouds like frightened sheep ready to scatter at the slightest threat. More threatening at the cape of Raz, somewhat calmer at La Baule, more subtly shaded towards Arcachon, more violent at Biarritz, more complacent at Lisbon, veiled over with a fine haze at Casablanca, and almost leaden grey at Dakar. Such is the sky of the Atlantic.

There is also the tropical sky, whether in Africa or South America, never completely blue, never completely overcast, streaked with subdued lightning, a sky that scorches the eyes and beats down on one's head. Washed clean by the torrential showers, it becomes dull again a few minutes later.

There is the sky of Sienna and that of Florence, a musical sky full of pink undertones.

There is the sky of London, veiled in a dull mist which, through modesty perhaps, it never completely discards.

There is the sky of Switzerland too, which ranges over the whole gamut of moods, dependent on the whims of the mountain breezes and the vapours rising from the lakes.

The desert sky, seeming almost black at moments it is so blue, which, at night, is alight with a myriad stars so that it seems to be on fire.

And all the other skies unknown to me.

But the sky of Paris is a poem in itself. It adds a pastel glow to the monuments, iridescent touches to the budding chestnut trees, turns the muddy waters of the Seine into a sparkling mirror, crowns the Sacré-Cœur with wispy plumes and winds diaphanous scarves round the top of the Eiffel Tower. It smiles down from the Elysian fields above to the Elysian fields below, it highlights the first flowers on the women's hats; it surrounds the monuments and houses with dancing shadows, which spill over like the colours of a Raoul





Dufy. It is not a holiday sky, one to gaze up at while lying on one's back in the grass or on the sand, that dazzles the eyes with a thousand iridescent beams. It is not a sky to make one dream, it is not a passionate sky like that which holds Avila or Toledo in its iron grip, it is not the scorched sky that burned down on the « Portuguese Nun ». It is the sky of Beaumarchais, of Musset and Giraudoux. A light, frothy silk, like organdie. A sky for flirtations, for light conversation, a witty sky. A sky whose gilded wand makes everything beautiful.

It turns a capital less majestic than Rome, less violent than Rio de Janeiro, less frenzied than New York, less sedate than London, less colourful than Madrid, less classical than Athens, less sober than Berne, less wilful than Berlin, less mystic than Moscow, into a tenderly dreamy town. It gives it the bloom of eternal youth. It refines and even brings a certain charm to the ridiculous steeples of Saint Clothilde, the backdrop of the Butte Montmartre, the golden dome of the Invalides. It makes the Arc de triomphe stand out against the horizon like a rearing horse. It turns the Bois de Boulogne into a welcoming oasis, the Buttes Chaumont into a romantic park, it lights up the gloomy façade of the Louvre, turns the pavements a cerulean blue, and the heaps of sand along the embankment to chrome yellow. It caresses the chimney pots, it coats the slates of the roofs with gleaming reflections.

The sky of Paris is a magician. Under its magic wand fair hair turns to gold, brown hair takes on a shining softness. It glosses over the dresses of the women with a veil as tenuous as the glaze on eighteenth century paintings.

* * *

It is not because I was born in Paris that I am more sensitive to it than others. I am merely repeating here the things visitors have been heard to say. And this explains a lot.

First of all, the character of the Parisian, always anxious, always ironical, affectionately fond of his town, but who is so afraid that you will not like in that he is the first to criticise it — like a mother who complains of her own children but is the first to be up in arms if anyone dares say anything against them.

It explains too the creative side of Paris — the Paris of the most inspired painters, sensitive musicians, that of the designers, perfumers and couturiers, milliners, writers and dramatists, not forgetting the magazine writers. I did not say that of the politicians, because it needs the solidity and cunning of the provinces to make a politician. Paris is too ethereal — because of its sky — this sky to which a young working girl pays tribute by perching a box of flowers on her window sill, by clapping onto the back of her head a little hat



called a «bibi» — a wisp of straw, a piece of ribbon and a couple of flowers, the flowered corolla of her skirt swinging gently as she walks.

Each morning three million Parisians, on rising or going off to work, pay homage to the sky of Paris, speak to it as to a friend, taking it to task when it is sad, offering it garlands of gratitude when it is gay.

A screaming of brakes, a shrieking of tyres, a muttered curse, and a car has screeched to a stop in order not to run over a fair admirer of the sky of Paris.

There are no scales fine enough to weigh it. Oh sky of Paris, you have three million lovers to gaze fondly up at you, to preen themselves with pride because of you: there are two thousand Parisians by birth or adoption who can no longer create when they are away from you...

* * *

From this balcony of the Place de la Concorde, the sky of Paris spreads gentleness and contentment over the city.

Gala