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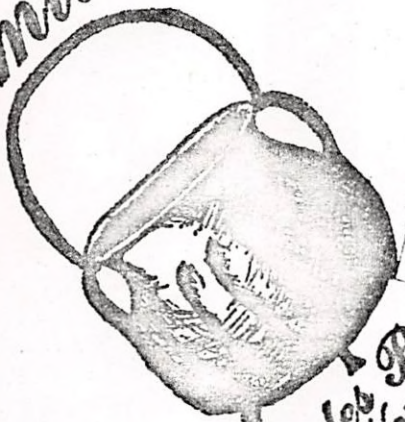
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NOM
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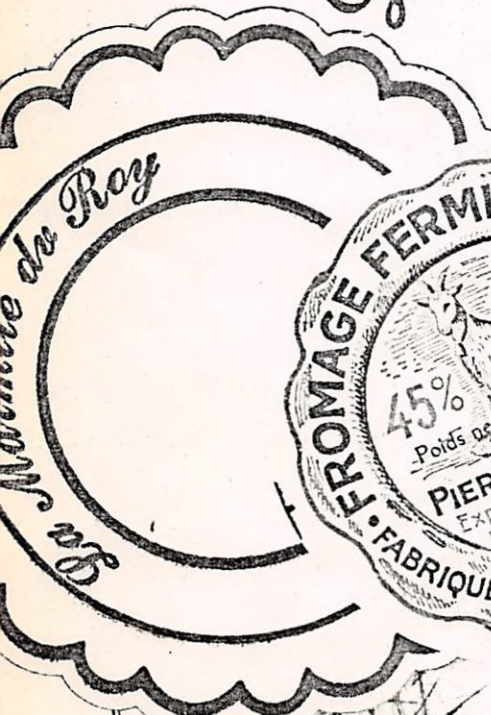
N° de CHAMBRE
ROOM NUMBER

42

La Marmite du Roy



7, Rue des Recours
78000 Versailles
951-01-15



Flouiste Dictionnaire
78 - VERSAILLES
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N° 417523

1.0 FRANCE

The clouds that had draped England, grey and cold, cleared a bit as we flew across the Channel. Heathrow had been damp, chilly, inaccessible. I looked forward to June sun in France, but the coast held little promise.

We flew not far above the French clouds, and I saw them white and wooly. A herd of sheep, washed in fabric softener and fluff dried. Through patches of open air I saw farmland, hedges, roads. As we neared Paris the openings closed and those white sheep grew browner in color. By the time we descended to Charles de Gaulle Aeroport there was rain on the windows.

Avis had reserved an Opel for me. It was Philippe's opinion that I should drive, the sooner to become acquainted with French road hazards. My arguments that an exhausted American driving for the first time on French free-ways would produce national disaster were to no avail. So I headed out into a light sporadic rain bound for Versailles.

It proved too easy. By noon I'd dropped Philippe at CMC France headquarters and checked in at the Trianon Palace Hotel, located adjacent to the grounds of the great chateau. After a meal in the hotel dining room, I crashed. My internal clock was steadily insisting that it was well past midnight and I'd best sleep soon or the body might call a general strike. As this seemed thoroughly French, I agreed to nap.

2.0 THE FIRST CRAZY EVENING

French hotel phones have a buzzing ringing quality that acts on me like a dentist's drill sans novocaine. In time I located the phone, only to have one disquieting sound replace another. In approximate English, a penetrating voice announced: "A message from Mr. Leonard. He will meet you on Monday in the AM."

"Wha.. what?" I cleverly replied. Of course this was a joke.

"That is all, monsieur." Click.

So I went back to sleep until 6:30, then arose and dressed in California casual. If Joe had cancelled his plans to meet me this Friday evening, he would have delayed his reservations when he called to leave the message for me. A check with the desk revealed that his reservations were unchanged. Another brilliant flash of logic led me to the bar. All Americans go to the bar. Joe is an American. Therefore Joe will go to the bar. How right I was!

It seems the French also go to le bar. Around nine, in came Philippe with a beautiful brunette on his arm. The sly dog, so quiet during his visit in California, had excellent taste in women. I was introduced to his wife, Michelle, who had come with Philippe on a mission to discover if the crazy American could cope with French elevators. They were afraid I might be helplessly hovering between the third and fourth floors. However, the bar was more accessible, so they'd decided to check it first. Probably table by table...

A round of drinks had hardly been ordered when Joe walked in, relying on his instincts to unerringly guide him. He was not, it seemed, the Mr. Leonard of that mysterious message. Indeed, he'd driven from the airport at Orly without error until within two blocks of the hotel. Goes to show the power of the bar.

As Joe was hungry and I starving, an expedition to some nearby tavern with more reasonable prices (cough! cough!) than the Trianon was arranged. Philippe took the wheel of Joe's hot Ghia and we were off. As the journey proceeded, our destination permuted from a local establishment to a fine bistro in Montmartre. We sped over the rainy streets into Paris, along the Seine ("See the Renault factory!"), around the Place de la Concorde ("If you ever get lost in Paris, just come here!"), along Avenue Capucines ("I'll stop here in the middle of the intersection to give you a better view."), and up to Montmartre ("Isn't this the way?" "No, left I think." "We were there before." "Perhaps, but going the same direction?").

On top of the hill there were no parking spaces. Legal ones, that is. The flics were thick, so we made several circuits before deciding on an illegal berth. As Philippe was maneuvering the machine into position, having first allowed us others to deplane, Michelle spotted a resident leaving his parking place. She told him of our plight. With Gallic generosity, he offered us his space until dawn.

Up old stone stairs we ran, onto the hill top. It was after midnight, but the shops were all open. Paintings, crafts, hand made jewelry. The rain had dampened activity at the outdoor cafes, but we found a place with live shell fish of all sorts displayed just inside the front door. The place was decorated in mirrors and art nouveau. Very pretty. The captain led us to a table at the rear, looking out onto a garden filled with empty tables (the rain, remember).

Now began another battle in the war between Parisian waiters and American tourists. Fortunately, we had two of the Free French with us, or it might have been a convincingly one-sided victory for the waiter.

First we were allowed to order a bottle of wine. Then we were thoughtfully given enough time to memorize our menus, during which time the waiter took care not to break our concentration by delivering the wine. I seized this opportunity to dump the glass shards off my plate and polish it on the table cloth. Some previous guest had apparently disapproved of the vintage. I disapproved of his sign of disapproval.

As we were now getting dry throats (climbing the hills of Montmartre is hard work for American tourists), we undertook to attract the waiter's attention. All ordinary devices proved inadequate. Even Joe's invocation of an ancient Sicilian curse didn't do the job (although the rain fell harder). Eventually, accident showed the way. You see, there were four of us at the table sharing one ash tray. This was complicated by the stuff in the center of the table, so I lifted an ash tray from an adjoining table. Relief.

Instantly the waiter spotted this violation of protocol and landed beside our table like a Concorde touching down at Dulles Airport. He appropriated the second ashtray with a deft twist of his wrist and spouted fluid French.

"Quick!" Joe prompted Philippe. "Tell him we want to order!"

"Tell him we want the wine now!" I added. This being done, with Philippe and Michelle both speaking, the waiter nodded and vanished. I wasn't sure about the vanishment (why not nail the toad's foot to the floor?), but the moment had passed so I tried for humorous conversation. "What did he say about the second ashtray?"

Philippe shrugged. "It is against fire regulations for American tourists to have more than one ashtray per table."

It was an uneven feast that midnight. The food was good; the wine good enough; the Calvados superb. Incidents were the true fiber of the night. The waiter's comment, when Joe and I had specified how our meat was to be cooked, "It is different for you Americans." Of the twelve oysters served on the half-shell, one had gone bad and the other gone AWOL. The gay couple two tables down, with their deep soulful looks into each other's eyes. The party of tourists who were seated at wet tables in the garden area. The violinist who upon being tipped 10 Francs demanded 10 more. The constant vigilance of the waiter against the use of a second ash tray.

And Calvados! It was Philippe who introduced us to this French passion -- and Joe and I both thank him. Calvados is apple cognac. With maybe a bit of paint thinner thrown in to clear the sinus passages. It's fabulous stuff. That night we drank enough to become thoroughly acquainted with its properties.

Not having had the benefit of a nap, as I had, Philippe declined to drive. (Well, all three of us others declined for him when he tried the ignition key in a telephone booth and asked what had happened to the rear seat.) And so it came to pass that I took the wheel. Not being one to shy away from local customs, I adopted the Parisian style of driving. Right wins!

Like a bobsled, down the hill we went. I didn't know the city, but navigating was no problem with reliable guides. Philippe and Michelle were natives and Joe's unerring memory was a powerful resource. At each intersection I had merely to ask, "Which way?"

"Right!"

"Straight!"

"Left!"

Soon we were in a section of Paris previously unvisited by our entourage. It was clearly one of the higher-tone districts. Quaint little shops with rock and disco blasting from the doorways. Tiny theatres advertising "Le Porn," which is French for documentary movies. Hotel entrances, nondescript and drab. Free-lance female guides, clad in uniforms of high heels, hot pants, low cut blouses. These businesswomen were positioned every six feet or so along the sidewalk. As I understand it, for a modest fee they will show you Paris.

We discarded a suggestion to take a six pack of guides back to the hotel and pressed onward. Soon the streets became quiet and deserted. The freeway appeared and took us back to Versailles.

3.0 BREAKFAST AT THE TRIANON PALACE HOTEL

I was to meet Joe for breakfast at our hotel. At 10:30 I ventured into the restaurant area, to discover that breakfast is served in the gallery area there. A beautiful view of the grounds was available. I settled down with a new pack of Benson & Hedges Special Filter, ready to enjoy good English cigarets again.

The waiter cometh. His English was nearly as restricted as my French. I communicated that two breakfasts were required. The standard fare was already before me: rolls, butter and jam. I attempted to order eggs. With great eloquence, combining simple English with sweeping hand signals, I made an order for two scrambled eggs and a side of bacon.

The waiter smiled and nodded. "Three or four minutes?" he asked.

Oh, no. I didn't want a soft-boiled egg. "OK, Forget the scrambled eggs! How about fried eggs? No? You know how to poach eggs in France, don't you? I'll have poached eggs. Poached. Like Julia Child does them. You have Julia Child on French television, don't you? 'The French Chef' on Channel 28. UHF? Two poached eggs. There's a good tip in it for you, Pierre."

The waiter smiled. He nodded. "Three minutes or four?" he repeated.

When Joe appeared we ate rolls, butter, jam, and a soft-boiled egg each. It was delicious. Bacon, it seems, has no soft-boiled analog in France.

Afterwards, we toured the grounds and Joe got some good shots of the hotel, the gates, and the animals on the palace pastures. Goats and sheep come right up to the fence. They speak impeccable French.

4.0 LA MARMITE DU ROY - I

The rain was still falling when Philippe and Michelle met us in the bar at two o'clock. They were to lead us on a shopping spree, the gory details of which I will omit through an unusual charitable impulse for the reader. Tales of the Interflora Caper, the Toy Shop Episode, the Genuine Italian Pizza Happening, and the Velizy II Interlude are best reserved for some later date. Likewise, the Story of the One-Armed Sumatran. It is best to move ahead to our 8 o'clock reunion at the Trianon bar.

At that time we established the evening's groundrules. (1) As we were all exhausted, the evening would consist of dinner at some hospitable restaurant in Versailles. (2) A trip to Paris was out, considering the rainfall rate. Of course, we all agreed to this pact. Joe recalled that Philippe had pointed out a good restaurant to which he'd never been. That establishment was chosen as our destination.

We parked on the sidewalk (how else?) and entered La Marmite du Roy. A large relaxed gentleman ushered us to a table. This was a small restaurant. I counted 32 seats. The atmosphere was casual; a good feeling was filling me for the first time on entering an eating place in France.

We were lively. Michelle's tooth, which had been paining her, was docile under the medication. Philippe suggested a rosé to start things. We explored the menu with zest. There was "no gigot" when Joe tried to order it, but he settled for duck with equal appetite. I had mussels for the first course -- a huge plate of the shellfish. The fish soup ordered by the others was a splendid creation with heavy garlic overtones. The cream served with it was so fresh and delightful that I spread my bread with it ('twas whipped) rather than butter.

We ate our happy way into the evening, culinary gusto intermingled with appreciation for the decor. I was taken by the paintings. Joe by the bar with its handwork and appointments. The food was so excellent! I was delighted by the sauce on my veal. We exchanged tastes of the fare and exclaimed that this was a jewel of French restaurants. Joe was "mellow;" he said so several times. This concept was communicated to all the French by all the Americans. I too was mellow, happy, taking pleasure in the food and company.

Imagine for a while that you have finished a meal at your favorite intimate restaurant. You reflect on the food and find it entirely staisfying. There are tastes you've never experienced. There are the many gladnesses of dining with friends. You push you chair back and stretch. It occurs to you that

the restaurant owners have been attentive; no disruptive moment has disturbed your repast. For a moment you drop out of thinking mode and concentrate on absorbing the ambience. You sense that this has been a time when life gave you only the best of combinations.

Desert and Calvados are suddenly a thought. This time will be prolonged.

Now the reality of La Marmite du Roy returns to better your idle dreams of continuing. There is cheese! With robust red wine -- as your friends educate you to the palate needs of European cheese. There is laughter! You grin and try a variety -- and discover chèvre. You've never tasted this cheese of the goat in America. Now you like it best.

Joe calls for champagne. All is swirling in images of pastel. The owners join you for a drink of the champagne. This opportunity to praise the restaurant is not missed. Although the owners speak little English, there is lively French conversation between those who speak that language. Good vibrations are prevalent.

The Calvados and desert come. You four share an ice cream dish with rice on the sides and a sauce with Grand Marnier. Another bottle of champagne is mandatory. The toasts, drunk in Calvados, span many languages. The restaurant is empty now except for your party. It is nearly midnight. As you leave, the owners give you miniature bottles with Calvados inside. (Have you not praised it as the greatest of all French inventions?) The night is perfect. This is France.

5.0 THE SECOND CRAZY EVENING

"Which way do I turn?" Joe asks Philippe. We are leaving Marmite du Roy and the high spirits have erased our exhaustion.

Philippe stumbles for a moment over the directions, then he crisps and gives clear orders as we turn through the twisting streets of Versailles. Soon the direction becomes clear; we are on the highway for Paris.

It is accepted. Joe finds a rock station and turns the volume high. English r'n'r floods the car, counterpointing the beat of the windshield wipers. We slide along the road, passing an accident and congregation of French police. Along the Seine it's easy going. "Just like Boston!" shouts Joe as he weaves through the traffic. Lighted boats are on the river.

Philippe will guide us to Pigalle. The route is circuitous. When we press into the district and its crowded streets the time is past 1 AM. With our mighty luck this night, we find a parking place in the center of things. Michelle is near sleep -- she will stay in the car. The three males will stroll Pigalle. Police are everywhere. It will be safe to leave a sleepy lady curled up on the back seat of a locked automobile.

Pigalle is international. The sex shows feature every race and creed -- not to mention a German shephard or two. It's the same hustle you hit in any action zone in America... or the world. The same come-ons. The same sleazy forbidden feel to it. What's interesting about Pigalle is the flavor of the little bars, theatres, food stands, and odd places scattered along the street. That and the people. Paris has the most international ambience of any city I've been in. The French have managed to transmute nationalities into a Gallic stamp without releasing those other threads of national character. It shows in Pigalle, whereas once out of Paris one never sees it.