

CHAPTER 16 - The Poetic CABARETS of Paris

In "The Ways of Men," the chapter explores the birth and flourishing of a unique artistic community centered around Montmartre, Paris, through the pioneering efforts of young Salis and the establishment of the iconic cabaret, "Chat Noir." Salis, distinguished by his exceptional taste, critical acumen, and business acumen, transformed an obscure café on Boulevard Rochechouart into a celebrated hub of artistic expression. By decorating the new locale in the rue Victor Masse with a blend of medieval aesthetics and offering an environment where beer flowed freely and waiters donned period costumes, Salis not only invigorated the spirit of the Louis XIII era but also fostered a renaissance of literary and artistic creativity.

The "Chat Noir" became a magnet for aspiring poets, musicians, and raconteurs, providing them an intimate space to share their works with the warmth and camaraderie of a close-knit circle. The charm of these gatherings lay in their informality and the mutual encouragement among the budding artists. Despite facing fierce opposition from established entertainment venues, which viewed the cabaret as a threat and launched a legal onslaught, Salis secured the support of President Grevy, ensuring the survival and prosperity of his venture.

This chapter also narrates the proliferation of cabarets in Montmartre, each with its unique contributions to the cultural landscape. Establishments like "4 z'Arts" and "Trombert" blossomed, extending the tradition of artistic camaraderie and innovation. For example, the invention of "shadow pictures" by Caran d'Ache introduced a novel form of storytelling that captivated audiences. Furthermore, the chapter sheds light on individual talents such as Jules Jouy, whose poignant songs received acclaim, and Aristide Bruant, whose "Mirliton" cabaret echoed his deep empathy for society's outcasts.

The narrative underscores how these cabarets, from the "Chat Noir" to "Le Mirliton" and beyond, not only supplanted the Latin Quarter as the heart of Paris's Bohemian life but also revolutionized artistic expression and public entertainment. The blend of satire, song, and the dramatic arts within these venues carved out a new cultural identity for Montmartre, making it a bastion of creativity and a sanctuary for the avant-garde. Through their resilience, innovation, and mutual support, the artists and poets of Montmartre challenged conventional norms, creating a legacy of artistic freedom and expression that resonated far beyond the confines of their intimate gatherings.