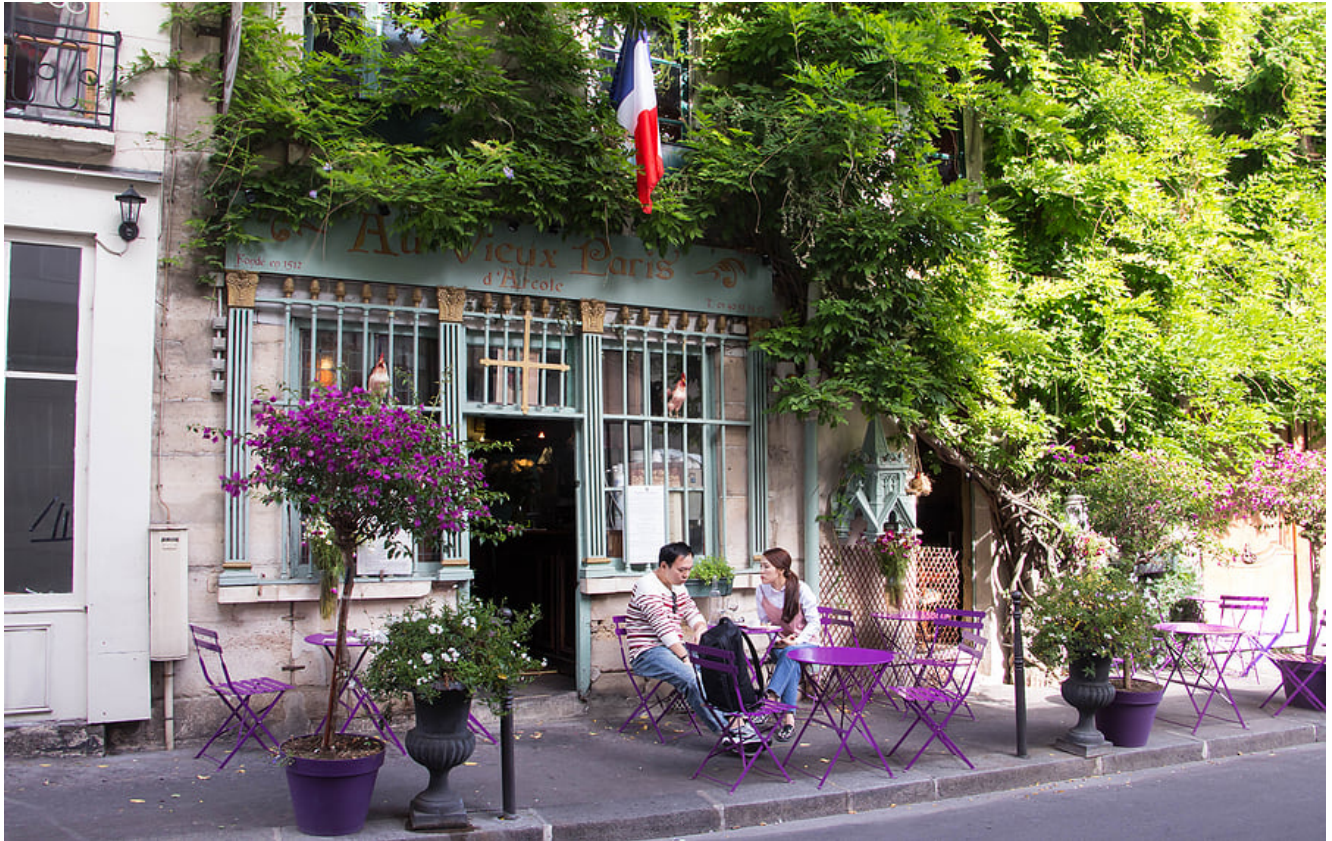# Blind Luck?

Paris France-September 27 2016 : The old traditional French cafe Au vieux Paris d'Arcole located in a touristy area near Notre Dame cathedral on Cite island.

by Theodore Dalrymple

There is a little Italian restaurant that we usually go to soon after our arrival in Paris, an unpretentious place where the pasta is good. It has a friendly atmosphere, and by now we are frequent enough customers to be greeted as friends.

The patronne allows her children, aged about 7 and 9, when they have no school the next day, to act as auxiliaries in the restaurant. How proud they are to show patrons to their table, to take their orders, and to bring their dishes when ready! It is charming to watch, and it is an excellent way to teach them things informally. When customers pay in cash, it is they who calculate the change due; they are even learning how to use the credit card machine. In this safe environment, they learn

not to fear strangers and how to address them politely. These things will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Imagine, however, a busybody who reported the use of child labor to the authorities. Children kept up after they should be in bed, and who might be exhausted the next day! Children exploited as ultracheap labor in place of adult labor! Children entering a busy kitchen where all sorts of dangers await them! Children carrying hot dishes that might scald or burn them if spilt! What a horrific picture could be painted! You could, if you wanted, make it all sound like the horrors of child labor of the 19th century. The children would therefore have to be protected from their cruel or irresponsible mother, who, being of Sicilian peasant origin, found this all perfectly normal. Never mind that it was obvious from a glance that she was a loving and solicitous mother, and the children were happy: The case must be investigated, and the law invoked.

This probably will never happen, but one can easily imagine it happening, for the state is not only meddling, but more than a few of us invite it and expect it to meddle in the name of public safety. And, of course, it is easier, less bothersome or dangerous, to meddle where citizens behave well than where they flout the law and behave in a ruthless and openly criminal manner. That is why minor regulations are often enforced with almost pedantic severity by agents of the state or the public administration, while serious infractions go not so much unnoticed, as uninvestigated. Fiddling while Rome burns is an occupational disorder of bureaucrats in an over-administered society.

At the next table in the restaurant was a completely blind man, in his middle to late 30s, I suppose, having his dinner. Beside him on the floor was his large and pacific Labrador guide dog, a handsome creature whose relations with his master were evidently those of trust and love, of course reciprocated. One could easily imagine their intensity.

The man, about half my age, had arrived in the restaurant before us, and finished before us. The kindness and solicitousness with which la patronne showed him out was touching. We watched him depart. Across the road was a hotel, an undistinguished establishment, also without pretension, but by no means uncomfortable. His dog guided him to the entrance, and la patronne explained that he lived there and dined often at her restaurant.

Of what his economic resources were, of what their provenance, I was completely ignorant; but strange to relate, I suddenly found myself envying rather than pitying him. I have no idea whether he was lonely, how he spent his days, whether he lamented his condition, whether he was bored. But in certain respects, his life was one of ease, at least by comparison with mine. If he always ate food prepared for him, if he had few clothes but those few that he had were laundered for him (he was well turned-out), if he had no property that imposed its care upon him, if his bedroom and his bathroom were his entire domestic sphere, then he was freed of many of the irritating tasks and anxieties that beset someone like me, of the middling economic condition, who wishes he had not been born the moment the plumbing springs a leak, that the boiler fails to work, that there is nothing in the larder for dinner tonight and must therefore go off to the supermarket to find something to cook. The blind man had no one with whom to keep up; and though not by nature competitive, yet I feel obliged to maintain my garden to a certain standard, not let my house fall into complete disrepair, and so forth, for fear of what the neighbors would say.

As it happens, I had been reading *The Tempest*, one of Shakespeare's last plays, on the train to Paris that day. Much as I venerate Shakespeare, my memory for his works is patchy at best, and each time that I reread one of them (I have read *The Tempest* several, if not many, times), I am surprised by what I find. Here, Gonzalo, the honest servitor of the King

of Naples who has saved Prospero after he was expelled from his rightful dukedom of Milan by his wicked brother, Antonio, speaks of the society on Prospero's isle that he would create if he were sovereign of it:

> I'th'commonwealth I would by contraries
> Execute all things, for no kind of traffic
> Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
> Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
> And use of service, none; contract, succession,
> Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
> No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
> No occupation, all men idle, all;
> And women too, but innocent and pure;
> No sovereignty—

When Sebastian points out that Gonzalo is dreaming of what he would do if he were himself sovereign, Gonzalo continues:

> All things in common nature should produce
> Without sweat or endeavour. Treason, felony,
> Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine
> Would I not have, but nature should bring forth
> Of its own kind all foison, all abundance,
> To feed my innocent people.

This is a mixture of Marx and Rousseau, avant la lettre.

How easy it is to imagine a life easier than one's own, free of all its miseries and frustrations; how difficult or impossible to achieve it!