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| **Jay Rayner, restaurant critic for the Guardian newspaper, eats at the flagship Michelin three-star restaurant of the George V Hotel in Paris. (2017)** | **In his book, *Robert Blincoe's Memoir* (1828) John Brown recounts Blincoe's first experience of eating food in the factory apprentice house.** |
| The dining room, deep in the hotel, is a broad space of high ceilings and coving, with thick carpets to muffle the screams. It is decorated in various shades of taupe, biscuit and sod you. There’s a little gilt here and there, to remind us that this is a room designed for people for whom guilt is unfamiliar. It shouts money much as football fans shout at the ref. There’s a stool for the lady’s handbag. Well, of course there is.  The canapé we are instructed to eat first is a transparent ball on a spoon. It looks like a Barbie-sized silicone breast implant, and is a “spherification”, a gel globe using a technique perfected by Ferran Adriàat El Bulli about 20 years ago. This one pops in our mouth to release stale air with a tinge of ginger. My companion winces. “It’s like eating a condom that’s been left lying about in a dusty greengrocer’s,” she says. Spherifications of various kinds – bursting, popping, deflating, always ill-advised – turn up on many dishes. It’s their trick, their shtick, their big idea. It’s all they have. Another canapé, tuile enclosing scallop mush, introduces us to the kitchen’s love of acidity. Not bright, light aromatic acidity of the sort provided by, say, yuzu. This is blunt acidity of the sort that polishes up dulled brass coins.  We hit it again in an amuse-bouche which doesn’t: a halved and refilled passionfruit, the vicious passionfruit supplemented by a watercress purée that tastes only of the plant’s most bitter tones. My lips purse, like a cat’s arse that’s brushed against nettles.  The cheapest of the starters is gratinated onions “in the Parisian style”. We’re told it has the flavour of French onion soup. It makes us yearn for a bowl of French onion soup. It is mostly black, like nightmares, and sticky, like the floor at a teenager’s party. There are textures of onions, but what sticks out are burnt tones, and spherified balls of onion purée that burst jarringly against the roof of the mouth. A dish of raw marinated scallops with sea urchin ice cream is a whack of iodine. It is the most innovative dish of the meal, though hardly revolutionary. Sea urchin ice cream turned up on Iron Chef America back in the 90s.  A main of pigeon is requested medium, but served so pink it just might fly again given a few volts. It comes with brutally acidic Japanese pear and more of that flavourless watercress purée. A heap of couscous is mined with a tiny portion of lamb for €95. Like the watercress purée, it tastes of little. It comes with gummy purées, unpleasant spherifications of lamb stock and mushy, one-note “merguez” sausages which are nothing of the sort. A sad, over-reduced sauce coagulates on the plate.  A dessert of frozen chocolate mousse cigars wrapped in tuile is fine, if you overlook the elastic flap of milk skin draped over it, like something that’s fallen off a burns victim. A cheesecake with lumps of frozen parsley powder is not fine. I ask the waitress what the green stuff is. She tells me and says brightly: “Isn’t it great!” No, I say. It’s one of the worst things I’ve ever eaten. It tastes of grass clippings. Parsley is brilliant with fish. But in cheesecake? They take it off the bill. With our mint tea, we are served an on-trend kouign amann, a laminated caramelised pastry. It’s burnt around the edges.  The overall bill is €600. Every single thing I ate at the restaurant Skosh for a sixth of the price was better than this. It’s bizarre. Not that the older gentlemen with their nieces on the few other occupied tables seem to care. The restaurant is never more than half full. Pictures of plates are snapped. Mind you I also take pictures, but mine are shot in the manner of a scene of crime officer working methodically. | The young strangers were conducted into a spacious room, fitted up in the style of the dinner room in the St Pancras workhouse, with long, narrow tables, and wooden benches. Although the rooms seemed tolerably clean, there was a certain rank, oily smell, which Blincoe did not very much admire. They were ordered to sit down at these tables -the boys and girls apart. The supper set before them consisted of milk-porridge, of a very blue complexion! The bread was partly made of rye, very black, and so soft, they could scarcely swallow it, as it stuck like bird-lime to their teeth. Poor Blincoe stared, recollecting this was not so good a fare as they had been used to at St Pancras. Where is our roast beef and plum-pudding, he said to himself. He contrived, with some difficulty to eat about one half of his allowance. The young strangers gazed mournfully at each other.  Whilst in this subdued state, his attention was suddenly and powerfully attracted by the loud shouting of many voices. Almost instantly the stone room filled, spacious as it was, with a multitude of young persons of both sexes; from young women down to mere children. Their presence was accompanied by a scent of no agreeable nature, arising from grease and dirt. The boys, generally speaking, had nothing on but a shirt and trousers. Their coarse shirts were entirely open at the neck, and their hair looked as if a comb had seldom, if ever, been applied! The girls, as far as Blincoe could see, were, like the boys, destitute of shoes and stockings. Their locks were pinned up and they were without caps; very few had on jacket or gown, but wore long aprons with sleeves, made of course linen, that reached from the neck to the heels. Blincoe was no less terrified at the sight of the pale, lean, sallow-looking multitude than his nostrils were offended by a dense and heavy smell of rank oil and grease that arose at their appearance! By comparison, the newcomers, Blincoe included, appeared like ladies and gentlemen.  On their first entrance, some of the old apprentices took a view of the strangers; but the great bulk first looked for their supper, which consisted of new potatoes, distributed at a hatch door, that opened into the common room from the kitchen. At a signal given, the apprentices rushed to this door and each, as he made way, received his portion and withdrew to his place at the table. Blincoe was startled, seeing the boys pull out the forepart of their shirts, and holding it up with both hands, received the hot boiled potatoes allotted for their supper. The girls, less indecently, if not less filthily, held up their dirty aprons, that were saturated with grease and dirt, and having received their allowance, scampered off as hard as they could to their respective places where, with a keen appetite, they devoured their allowance and seemed anxiously to look for more. There was no cloth laid on the table, to which the newcomers had been accustomed in the workhouse; no plates, nor knives, nor forks – to be sure the latter utensils were not necessary for a potato supper. Blincoe saw no other beverage drunk than pump water. Their supper being devoured, the hungry crew ran to the tables of the newcomers and voraciously devoured every crust of bread and drop of porridge they had left. |