

FIVE FILM SHOWS AT ONCE!

Entertainment Was "Free" in St. Malo As I Remember It

(Written for "The Listener" by JAMES HARRIS)

THERE was always something irrepressibly comic about the port and old walled town of St. Malo, which I knew chiefly as a place where one got off a boat and waited for a train on the way from Jersey to Paris. St. Malo, in its larger way, was a sort of Lyttelton or Picton, but where the delays were usually for a whole day owing to tides and trains not coinciding, and the delays always entertaining.

St. Malo had a tough coast, with the same 36ft. tides that we had in Jersey. It is easy to understand why the invasion forces have by-passed it, and "done a Singapore," coming at St. Malo from the landward side, down the east bank of the unbridgeable Rance. Coming in from the sea we used to pass numerous rocky islands whose stone fortifications dated from Napoleonic and earlier times. Doubtless, they have since been modernised. From the bridge—passengers were allowed on the bridge on those boats—the first sight of St. Malo was the spire of the cathedral, followed up over the horizon by the great cliff-top fortifications of the town. There would be speculation amongst the passengers: "I wonder if they've repaired the trams yet?" And when we came alongside, there the trams were, the museum specimen engines looking older than ever, and the coaches looking crazier than ever. St. Malo's trams were sort of street trains, and each of the little coaches had at least one of its four springs broken.

Trams Tell a Tale

The condition of the trams was the first indication the visitor had of two complementary tendencies which exist amongst the Malouins. One: not to throw anything away until it is completely worn out. And two: not to repair anything, because then it will be really worth while getting a new one. This latter principle went rather haywire in the case of the tomb of Chateaubriand. Chateaubriand, the one of St. Malo's famous sons who was not an explorer or a pirate, had a tomb overlooking the sea on a rocky island. But the rocks were not quite tough enough to withstand the Channel seas. There was Press lamentation, but no action, of course, though in this case the job of getting a new one would not be so simple. The first of the two tendencies was most heartily upheld by a tradesman we knew there, a carpenter. This man still habitually wore in the street the tin hat he had come home in in 1918. It hadn't worn out yet, so why buy another?

Four scales of prices were the rule among shopkeepers and cafe proprietors in the St. Malo district. In ascending order they were for local inhabitants; for French tourists; for un-American foreigners; and lastly, and greatest, for Americans. Whether one

came from Jersey or from New Jersey made quite a difference to the cost of living.

From Cod-Fish to Tourists

From her past exploits in exploration and privateering, St. Malo had inherited an industry of cod-fishing on the Newfoundland Banks. Her fine fleet of trans-atlantic sailing ships is to be met with in the pages of Kipling's *Captains Courageous*. But in recent years storms have caused much loss of good ships and of good Breton seamen, and a falling off in public taste for dried salted cod caused much loss of profit. More and more St. Malo was living off the tourist trade, which is a rather shameful thing for a proud town to come to, as though Malouin Jacques Cartier, who brought Newfoundland and Canada under the crown of France, should have to live by reciting his reminiscences and selling Red Indian curios in the gutter. The Malouins took the tourists' money, but were resentful about the whole business. They cursed the English in general, but rarely quarrelled with them individually.

West of St. Malo was the broad Rance estuary, with six-knot tides ripping in all directions, and fleets of ferry-launches taking tourists, especially the English, across to the rather pointless resort of Dinard on the other side, or up the river to the fine old town of Din, where the river had its first bridge. These boats were called *vedettes*. The word is the same as the French for film stars, I shall never understand why.

"Free Flicks"

A great St. Malo institution were the "free flicks" in the evenings. In the square inside the walls of the town was a row of cinema screens, whose number had grown to five when I was there last. The screens were across the road from a row of five cafes, each with many tables and chairs spread out over the broad pavement. In an upstairs window of the tall buildings, each cafe had a Pathe 9.5 millimeter projector and a stock of old silent films. From the bedroom window of the hotel I have watched at least three shows at once, deftly twisting the neck to keep track of three stories.

Thinking again of St. Malo, I like to imagine G.M.'s Little Man wandering into the square as an innocent tourist, and sitting at one of these cafe tables to watch *Les Perils de Pauline*. At once a waiter is at his elbow. What will he have? He asks for a beer, and probably as his French is not very good, what the waiter brings him is a byrrh, which he finds he doesn't much care for. By



FOUR SCALES of prices were the rule in St. Malo: a Breton fisherman auctions off his day's catch at the sea wall

the time he has got through that, and placated the hovering waiter by having a couple of ices he feels like moving, pays a large number of small coins, and walks a couple of paces along the pavement to see the next show, Tom Mix in *Mon Copain le Roi*. Here, too, there is a waiter, and this time the Little Man orders something he's sure he can pronounce, like Benedictine. He is watching Tom Mix in charge of a Wild West Show pal up with a boy king in the Balkans when suddenly he leaps to his feet. It is not that he wants to applaud and award five stars, but because out of the corner of his eye he thinks he has glimpsed a scene from *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* on the furthest screen of all.

Towards midnight all the picture-shows close down, and the Malouins get up in a body and roll away up the narrow cobbled streets, drunkenly cursing the English. But the Little Man does not get up. He is in his characteristic boredom attitude by now, too full of mixed drinks and mixed pictures to move, and the poorer by about half-a-quid for his evening at the free cinemas.

No doubt the *vedettes* have all been sunk in practice invasions of England, and the place generally organised along approved Nazi lines. The quite reasonable idea that if a tram-driver gets thirsty, he should park his tram and passengers and go and get a drink had presumably not been tolerated by the *herrenvolk*, as the superiority of German rule ruthlessly demonstrated. Therefore, of recent years, the Malouins will have been doing their cursing in sober earnestness, cursing the Boche, and our friend the carpenter will have been blessing his foresight in preserving his durable tin hat. But things are changing now once more, and soon the good people of the old and warlike port will be able to roll home from the pictures happily cursing the Americans.