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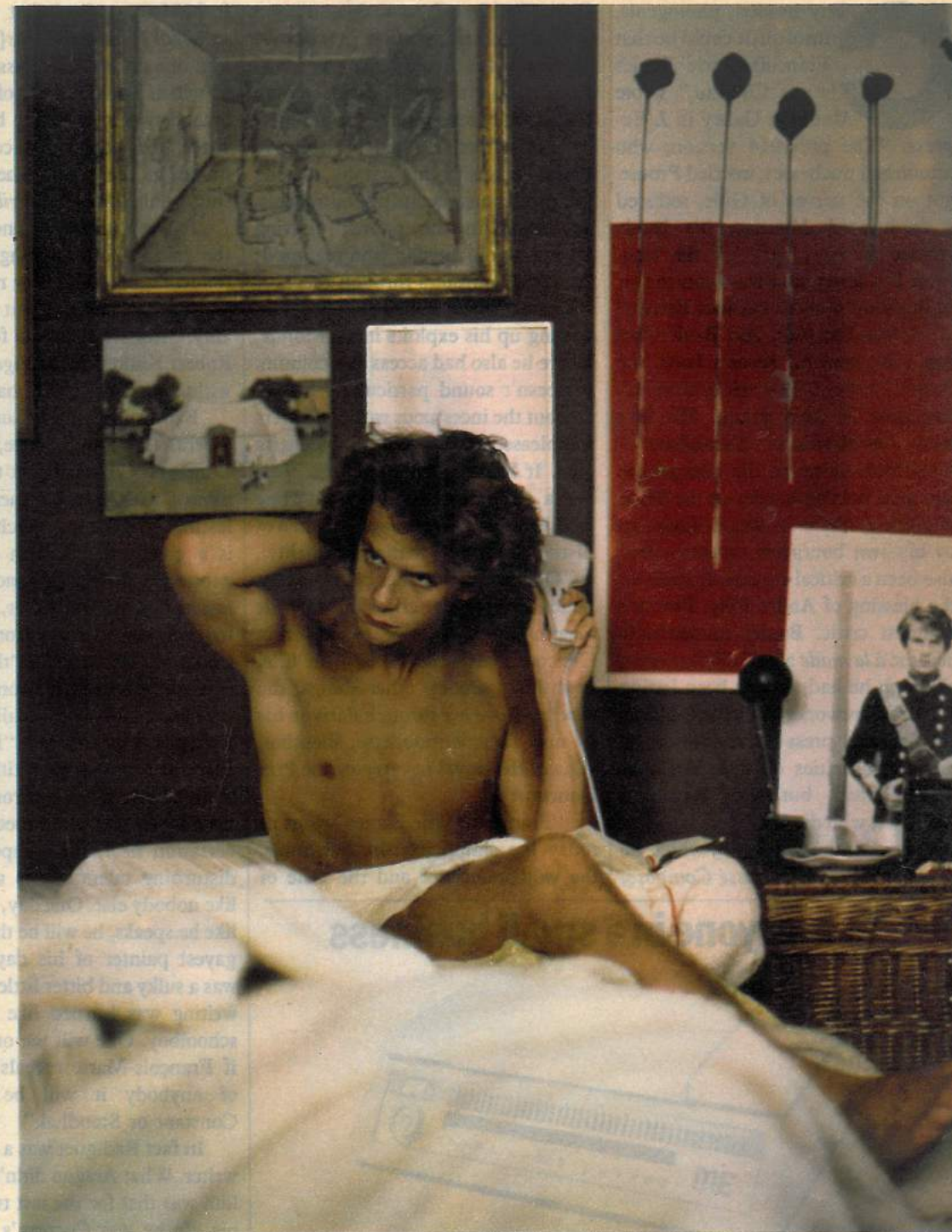
François-Marie Banier - golden boy of Paris



ANTIQUES, PART 7
PLUS
THE VICTIMS OF
BELFAST



Dinner with Louis Aragon at Laurent, Banier's favourite restaurant. "He is the most wonderful father I could have," says Banier. Right: "He has the hair of Saint-Saens," said Marie-Laure de Noailles. It needs care



Afternoons of writing in the elegance of Angelina's tea shop in the Rue de Rivoli



Banier as adolescent actor Bjorn Andresen: "It's not so much Death in Venice, as life in Paris," said a friend, on the subject of Banier's friendship with Louis Aragon



Exit from another lunch at Maxim's with Suzanne Defforey, Sagar's sister



Lunch at the Hôtel de Pompadour at Fontainebleau with the Comtesse de Noailles, and then a gallop in the garden

A CHILD OF THE TIMES

François-Marie Banier, who is just 25, has written two slim volumes much praised by French critics, one of whom compared him to both Raymond Radiguet and Jean Cocteau. He leads the social life of a Paris *mondain* more frantically than Cocteau can ever have done, recruiting admirers, infuriating people with his insolence, delighting with his *drôleries*. He dresses in white (right), lunches at Maxim's and dines at Laurent, often with Louis Aragon, France's grand old man of letters who has enthused in print over Banier's personality and writing. Some say Banier's talent has been exaggerated by the older admirers in whose company he is so frequently seen; Banier himself says that he is trying to prolong his childhood. Profile of a peculiarly French phenomenon by James Fox; photographs by Eve Arnold



Curly headed, photogenic, insolent, it could be that François-Marie Banier is our Cocteau," wrote Matthieu Galley in *L'Express*. "The pre-1914 version, who astonished duchesses, worried Proust, got on the nerves of Gide, seduced a fresh-faced Mauriac, his hands crossed in piety, just off the train from Bordeaux, and was soon to spit in the soup of old Monsieur Barrés."

It was last year, and Banier had just published his second book, *Le Passé Composé*. The critics were extravagant in their praise. His first book, *Les Résidences Secondaires* — a scathing satire on the bourgeoisie and their holiday houses on the Seine at Héricy, where he was brought up by his own bourgeois parents — had also been a critical success. It received the blessing of André Billy, France's grandest critic. Banier immediately became *à la mode* after Billy's review, although he had already been letting off social fireworks as Pierre Cardin's child-wonder press officer. The critics found similarities of style not only with Cocteau but with Raymond Radiguet, who died at 20.

Between the first book, which he wrote at 19, and *Le Passé Composé*,

Banier had been busy making himself into a celebrity, writing provocative articles in *Le Figaro*, where he occasionally had the front-page column traditionally reserved for the grandest men of letters. He had been out in Paris, exercising his wit by playing the prodigious, beautiful, outrageous adolescent in the salons; meeting Dali, Aragon, anyone who mattered; accosting ministers through their car windows from his mobilette; and writing up his exploits in *Le Monde*, where he also had access to a column. It doesn't sound particularly attractive but the incestuous world of letters was pleased. Paris was reproducing its own. It had created an *enfant cheri* like a character from Colette. They labelled him a *personnage* — a 'man of distinction', rather than a 'personality'.

On the radio, Banier provoked the nation with his cheek. Edmonde Charles-Roux, winner of the Prix Goncourt, marvelled at him in *Elle*, describing, among other things, the time he drove her through Paris on his by now famous mobilette, shouting, "Out of the way, I'm carrying the Prix Goncourt".

"François-Marie Banier brings us today the simplicity, the harshness, the wild innocence and the taste of

forbidden passions that marked the author of *Diable au Corps* [Radiguet]," said one critic of *Le Passé Composé*, in which Banier wrote of incestuous love between a young brother and sister. "His adolescents could also be found in the room where Cocteau shut in his *Enfants Terribles*."

It was difficult to know whether the critics were creating fashion or following it. While they reviewed his books, they talked about his personality. "But what counts for us," said Robert Kanters in *Le Figaro*, "is that, without any doubt, he has talent."

Banier had met Louis Aragon several times by chance, and when Edmonde Charles-Roux took him to dinner with Aragon there began a lasting friendship, which some say is a great love. Aragon devoted an enormous amount of space to Banier in *Les Lettres Françaises*, and reprinted two whole pages from *Le Passé Composé*. He wrote of "the certainty of finding myself in front of a true novelist". But he challenged the Radiguet comparisons. "Banier only resembles him as an antithesis. He is the maddest, most generous, the funniest being you could meet. For conversation he has an impetuous and disturbing talent, he is a raconteur like nobody else. One day, if he writes like he speaks, he will be the cruellest, gayest painter of his day. Radiguet was a sulky and bitter little boy whose writing was learned like a swotting schoolboy. One will see one day that if François-Marie reveals something of anybody it will be Benjamin Constant or Stendhal."

In fact Radiguet was a marvellous writer. What Aragon didn't like about him was that for the last two years of his life he was Cocteau's boyfriend, and Aragon hated Cocteau.

Banier used *Le Figaro* as an advertisement for himself, and he wrote a question and answer interview with himself with the headline, "Do you know me?" He wrote arrogant little squibs which, said *L'Express*, "are served up like spice on the breakfast tables of the bourgeoisie". Some of it was clever and amusing, but much of it was futile and irritating. He was one of the youngest writers ever to have the *Le Figaro* column, and he set himself up as the expression of youth. With complete lack of self-consciousness he attempted pieces on topics he knew precious little about.

"It is true that he is often a little light on the facts," said Jean François Brisson, of *Le Figaro*, "but we like his personal style."

In the salons he had acquired the best of patrons and patronesses. "Now I have the best father in the world, Aragon," he says. "And I had the best mother, Marie-Laure."

Marie-Laure de Noailles, the eccentric, Left-wing, philandering Vicomtesse, was one of the great intellectual hostesses of the Thirties — salon keeper for the Surrealists, backer for Bunuel's first movies. She died in 1970 aged 67.

"The only person who really appreciated my originality," says Banier, "and who paid me the greatest compliment on it was Marie-Laure, who said, 'There are only three really funny people that I have ever met in my life. Sacha Guitry, Jean Cocteau and yourself'."

When he was 15, Marie-Laure saw him in the Pen Club with his mother and dedicated her book *Journal d'un Peintre* to him, with the inscription: "To François-Marie Banier, whose face will bring him happiness." He telephoned her two years later, and saw her, like he sees Aragon now, almost every day. She wrote, "François-Marie Banier is an *assemblage* of quicksilver. He has the voice of Cocteau, the stride of Arthur Rimbaud, the hair of Saint-Saens. His heart exists. If you seize it you will be lucky." In a letter to him she said, "François-Marie, be careful. You float like a poem above a Dantean abyss."

He pleases the old ladies and the faggots," said a writer acquaintance of his. A newspaper editor in Paris said, "All his editors, if you look at it, were old men, dazzled by this beautiful boy." "I am surrounded by jealousy and dislike," says Banier.

And the volumes? In his most recent book, *Head First*, which will appear in the autumn, there was, according to his editor, some loose and sloppy writing. "Whenever Banier gets to the point where the development of a serious idea is required, or where a human situation needs resolving, he jumps clear." "The lightness of his style should not be confused with a lack of profundity," said Herve Mille, Coco Chanel's great friend, and Banier's mentor. "It's a kind of *pointillisme*." "I'm not here to write with a message," says Banier. "Nothing is more tiresome than *saying* things."

It irritates him to the point of obsession to be reminded that he is a socialite and he says that the threat of

loneliness and disillusion with people are the sad contradictions of his life.

"People who criticise me for being *mondain* are completely mad. What they don't realise is that if I didn't see them I wouldn't write. I couldn't say I have such a personality, because that would sound pretentious. But I have such originality, such extravagance, such fantasy, such madness that if I stayed alone with myself I wouldn't survive. I would devour myself. I usually see only people who are characters. I don't see imbeciles. I am not a snob like the sons of the good families at Maxim's. People reproach me for seeing older people. They are the only ones who tell me anything."

Banier is wrapped in a towel late into the morning, making telephone calls to fix up lunch, and dinner. His day usually consists of getting up late, making the calls, lunching, repairing to Angelina's tea shop on the Rue de Rivoli, which is full of smart old ladies, to write up his diary or work on his novel, or going home to write, then dinner. The writing is fitted in every day with remarkable discipline and regularity. But today, Friday, is definitely a good day for lunch at Maxim's. François-Marie Banier, who is very, very chic, treats the place like his local diner. But it is the first time I have been there and he tells me that anyone who is unknown is put right at the back of the restaurant. From that limbo of *boiserie* and stained glass you can't be a part of the floor-show, which is what we, of course, are.

Fresh from the Cipriani hotel in Venice, where he has been spending the weekend, he has come to Maxim's on the mobilette. He is the beautiful boy who drives so dangerously that one of his elderly friends, who had given his chauffeur instructions to follow the flash of golden curls around the Place de la Concorde, vomited through the window in terror.

He has come in his white suit, white shirt, white trousers and white shoes. These are the very first days of Banier's summer of whiteness, and the lady in the dry cleaner around the corner has been subjected to a tirade of arrogance, a *tour de force* of bad behaviour. There are rust stains on the trousers and he stabs his fingers at them again and again. Only the ludicrous extravagance of his complaints saves the lady from being unbearably insulted. That is the hateful side of Banier.

Banier says to the wine waiter,

"Do you have any wine that has the scent of a rose?" We get some Beaune, and it tastes of violets.

He is alerted by the gallery to his left. There is Princess Ruspoli, and there is Lilli Volpi (the Countess Volpi) and a cat-like grin from Banier and a mime across to the table to ask her whether she will lunch tomorrow confirms my suspicions that Lilli Volpi is a patroness of the arts.

Marisa Berenson, only-just deposed *Vogue* image of the American beauty, comes over to say, "*Comment ça va?*" *Vogue* apart, she is beautiful in her pleated skirt and wedgy shoes. Lunch is ready, Marisa.

Suddenly exasperated after a day of my interviewing him, Banier says in a loud voice, "I love myself. I am great and beautiful. And I love myself." In French it sounds better. "*Je suis grand et beau et je m'aime moi-même.*" He spits it out and stares at me, his mouth turned down in petulance like a child who is inviting you to slap his face.

The week had begun with a lunch at L'Espace Cardin, Pierre Cardin's theatre on the Champs Elysées, of which Banier is an assistant director — a sinecure position which Cardin has given Banier because he likes him. "Banier is free," says Cardin. "What interests me is his life." He met Cardin at a party when he was 18 and a year later was made press officer at Cardin's headquarters, where he was universally disliked. "I didn't defend him because he was my friend," said Cardin, "but because he was clearly better than anyone else around me."

Aragon is at lunch with Cardin and Jacques Grange, the boy Banier lives with in an apartment behind the church of St Sulpice. Jacques is very pretty too. He's an interior decorator of the chic-est kind, a star of *Maison et Jardin*, but passive, simpler than Banier, and really much nicer. Banier uses him as a kind of feed man, teases him mercilessly, and Jacques finds it hard to smile at these moments, a psychological mistake he is never able to rectify. And it urges Banier on. Aragon tells of meeting Ho Chi Minh in the Twenties when he was the liaison man for the French Party. He is dressed in a St Laurent safari suit. He raises an indulgent eyebrow as Banier goes through his performance, telling of exploits on his mobilette, giggling and bursting with laughter, clutching Aragon's arm. He turns to Jacques: "Louis, did you hear it? Did you hear" ➤➤➤

what Jacques said? Jacques, for God's sake I beg of you, Jacques." A shouting match starts. Jacques turns to Aragon with the *coup de grâce*. "Have you seen François-Marie's taste, Louis? Frightful." Jacques reddens slightly, the flush of victory, and Banier stares at him.

We drive to Fontainebleau for lunch at the Hotel de Pompadour, home of Nathalie de Noailles, daughter of Marie-Laure. Standing in the scented library near the Goya in his white suit, François-Marie, enraptured by his surroundings, says, "All right. Yes. I am *mondain*, if this is what *mondain* is. I would much rather have known Marie-Laure than Simone de Beauvoir, who is an imbecile."

Back to Paris. Dinner with Hiram Keller. Remember him in *Satyricon*? The talk is of Venice. "I lived the life of a young man. I did everything I am reproached for," says Banier. "How are the Brandolinis?" says Keller, an old young man of Venice. "How are those stupid Furstenbergs?" says Banier. We eat at Laurent, a gloomy, staid restaurant off the Champs Elysées, where Banier always eats. There is a pianist who tried to play the *Moonlight Sonata* when he and Jacques were having a *dîner intime*. Banier told him it was awful. Tonight he sends him a note across the restaurant which says that "every note was a miracle".

It was at Laurent that he and Jacques had their joint birthday party, during that week, and—apart from their respective exterior romances—they were surrounded only by very chic people of their parents' generation. François-Marie delights his indulgent audiences with stories about his childhood. There were the two Vietnamese school friends he had invited for tea, without warning his mother they were Vietnamese. "Mama opened the door and found herself nose to nose with two lemons." And how, after they had refused the orangeade, cakes and tea, she offered them rice in desperation. "And I had a black friend at school. But *black*, like a tin of polish, the son of the Ambassador from Upper Volta. She said, François this is really going too far."

What saves Banier from being a kind of tinselly nightmare of a socialite is that for three hours a day he is trying to write serious novels, and for the rest he is funnier and more original than most. "But if I didn't know him well," says Pierre

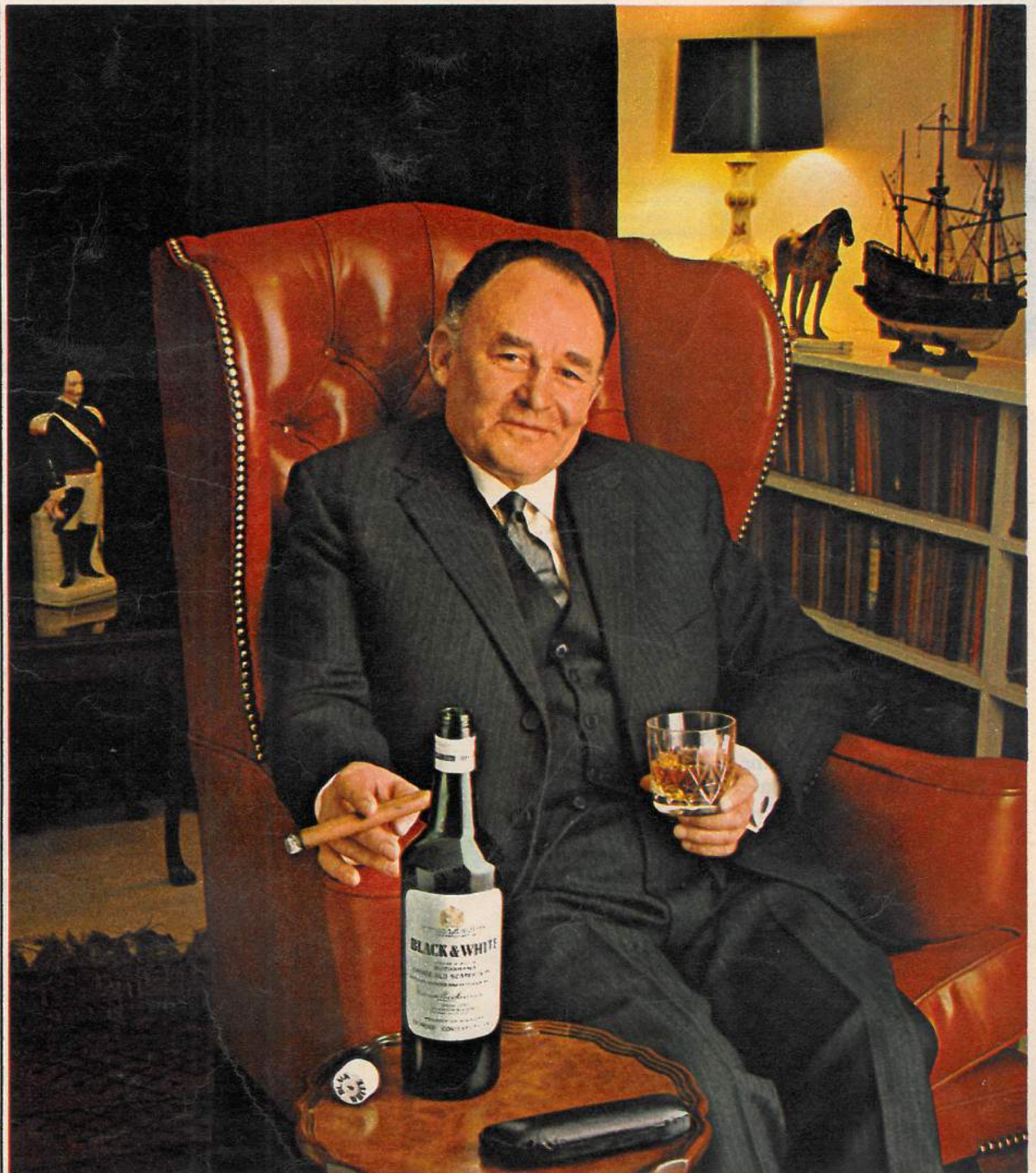
Cardin, "I would find him odious, *odious*." His editors are frightened that the social life will dissipate his talent. "On the other hand," says Bernard Privat, head of Grasset, Banier's publishers, "if he had come from the Ile de Ré and never left it, there wouldn't be nearly so much noise about his books."

Banier has the capability of looking at it objectively, at certain moments. "Perhaps the most there is in store for me is what I am at the moment," he says. "A young man on a mobilette who goes very fast with very pretty eyes and beautiful hair and there you are. They say God, how

he must be loved. How he must have a pretty house. My house is horrible. I'm not specially loved. But to be able to give people illusions, that is the satisfaction of creating envy."

"He is a terrible socialite," says Aragon. "He never refuses an invitation. But what he likes best is writing." Aragon has come to Laurent, for this final dinner, in a week in which Banier's narcissism had been fully satisfied by being followed and photographed wherever he went. Aragon is dressed in a brand new Levi jeans suit and blue sneakers. We walk him home from Laurent to the

Rue de Varenne on the Left Bank where he lives. I ask Banier why he doesn't use the socialite world for material in his books. "You can never see people as they really are," he says. "One dreams of what they are and always lives with a false idea. When you realise what they are about they seem very little, very mediocre, very shabby, and that makes it all worthless. There are some rare flowers in my garden like Aragon and Marie-Laure, and I'm sorry you didn't meet Françoise Sagan, and Marguerite Duras. And Max Ernst. And Dali. And César. But you can't see all of my life in one week" ●



Some things are easier to make decisions about than others. Like Black & White whisky. 