Therese — 'Saint Of The Little Way'

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By FRANCES PARKINSON KEYES

— PROLOGUE —

Installment II

THE CRUCIFIX OF ST. DESIR

When I went to Lisieux to write the life of little Saint Therese, I regarded the assignment as an isolated one. I had never done any writing of a religious character before and I did not expect to again. Nevertheless, when I said good-by to my new-found friends, both in the cloister and in the world, I somehow did not feel the farewell was final. So I was not astonished—nor were they—when I returned the following year.

It is hazardous to return to a place which has furnished complete contentment and unique inspiration, such a return often results in disillusionment. But this was not my experience in Lisieux. It seemed natural to spend part of every summer at the Abbaye.

Eventually, on the feast day of St. Louis of France, 1939, the little chapel of blessed memory was the scene of my own reception into the Church.

I left Lisieux the following morning, headed for Nevers and Lourdes, to write a biography of Bernadette. It was the same day that France began mobilizing for the Second World War. I remained in France until the source material was gathered and the new book fully outlined. Finally I came home. For a short time thereafter, I continued to have tidings of my friends in France, none alarming. Afterwards, the Occupation brought with it a long, long silence. Then came terrible news: Lisieux had been attacked by three squadrons of airplanes and almost destroyed . . . by the English the night of June 7th, by the Americans the following afternoon.

The crucifix still stands, unscathed, before the demolished parish church of St. Desir, originally the chapel of the Benedictine Abbey at Lisieux. In this chapel St. Therese received her first Holy Communion.

Through some miracle Carmel was spared; the wind changed as the first swept down the street. But the Abbaye des Benedictines was totally demolished. The Prioress and twenty nuns were killed.

Gradually, more news filtered through. I learned that several nuns, badly wounded, had been taken to the Municipal Hospital. When this was also hit and ignited, they were removed into neighboring chateaux which had been transformed into make-shift hospitals. The other nuns had somehow made their way over shell-torn roads to a farm and found shelter in a stable.

Still within hearing of the bursting shells, they resumed recitation of their Office where they had left off the night before. Next, they reorganized their conventual life. Their chaplain celebrated Mass at a portable altar; the Community knelt in the hay which served them as bedding. Cow stalls were used as both sacristy and confessional.

When some of the hardier nuns forged their way back to the ruins of their Abbaye, they found that the fire had destroyed almost everything. In one tragic night they had lost not only their Prioress and twenty of their fellow nuns, but their saintly relics, their holy vessels, their artistic treasures and their priceless archives. Notre Dame du Pre had become Notre Dame of Bethlehem.

Bombs Bring Death

The days in the stable were laborious, the nights harassed. Air raids continued. The aged chaplain was standing nearby, the shock proved too great for his strength to sustain, coming, as it did, after so many others. He suffered a paralytic stroke. The nuns watched over him prayerfully and cared for him as best they could. But they had no medicine. When means were finally found to hospitalize him, he was beyond all help. A few days after his death, word came that Mere Marie Aimee, the nun most injured during the bombardment, had died also. Even though their worst privations, materially speaking, were over, the refugees were heavy hearted.

However, more adequate shelter now seemed assured. They left the stable to install themselves in the parish hall of St. Meem at Pre d'Auge—a lovely locality, the same where Madame de Crequi had taken refuge during the Revolution. If she could triumph over her hardships, so could they, her spiritual daughters tried to assure themselves. But within a few hours the Germans had dislodged them from the parish hall and they returned to their stable. Then as the line of battle came closer and closer, they refugeed again—this time to Paris.

Soon after they were established in temporary quarters there, I began to hear from them again, not indirectly and in snatches, but through long letters which they wrote me themselves, telling me everything I have set down here and much besides. They were all homesick for Normandy and eventually, with the help of a small French society, Amis de Notre Dame du Pre, they were able to secure title to a property known as La Montellerie, only a few kilometres from Lisieux. Though ill-adapted to claustral requirements, it would serve as an expedient. With rejoicing—and with the aid of American Army trucks!—the Benedictines took up residence at the Montellerie.

Return To Lisieux

Shortly thereafter I went back to them—to the former library of the chateau, destined to serve me as a combination bedroom, dining room, reception room and study. It was pretty crowded and lacked the blessed serenity of the Abbaye. But it would answer its purpose, not only in establishing contacts I needed to authenticate a new novel, but as a vantage point from which to visit the stricken people whose past kindnesses had facilitated my first labors in Lisieux. The Noels had lost everything and were living in one room in devastated Caen; Monsieur Caillaux had perished miserably in a concentration camp; his widow, who had escaped in her nightgown when their beautiful home fell in flames, had taken refuge at a tiny villa near the sea. I wanted to get to the Noels and to Madame Caillaux, to Carmel and elsewhere, as soon as possible. But my first obligation was to the Benedictines.

I had brought with me for distribution as many of the necessities for creature comfort and civilized living as I could. The nuns unpacked the boxes with cries of delight. If I had come laden with the treasures of the Indies, these could hardly have meant more to them. Yet, cold and hungry and comfortless as they had been for so long, their joy reached its culmination when I took a small box from my bag and handed it to the Prioress.

"I have brought back the silver and ebony rosary, the Benedictine crucifix and the medal of St. Benedict, given me on my first birthday with you," I told her. "And the plates with the story of the Sieur de Frombolsie are all safe in my china closet at home."

"So our treasure was not completely destroyed after all!" one of the nuns exclaimed.

My approach to the Montellerie had been from Le Havre. The port was a shell, but the intervening countryside was lush and verdant, the fields full of grazing cattle and the gardens full of blooming flowers. Many fine old half-timbered houses still stood intact. It was not until I went into Lisieux that I really began to see what had happened in the course of the Liberation and to visualize the full impact of disaster. Many of the streets were gone entirely; it was almost impossible to tell where they had been, because of the endless rubble piles.

Crucifix Stands

The nun who had formerly been the Mere Hoteliere and was now the Mere Sous-Prieure was with me. She made no comments as we went along and I could not have talked if I had tried. But as we approached the place where the Abbaye had been, I suddenly cried out: "Ma mere, the crucifix! The great crucifix in the courtyard of Saint Desir! That is still standing!"

It loomed ahead of us, huge, gaunt and black. Beyond it lay the ruins of St. Desir and of Notre Dame du Pre. Behind it the sun was setting, not through the usual soft haze of a Lexovian evening, but in a flaming sky.

We wandered on through the ruins, recalling the memories these evoked. The form of the ancient Abbaye was still partially discernible; but the Sous-Prieure told me that even that would soon be a thing of the past. The tottering walls were a menace to public safety. Then even the last traces of the thousand-year Abbaye would be gone.

"But perhaps another could rise here."

"How? We are ruined. Where would the money come from?"

I could give no definite answer. I could only say that if Madame de Crequi had found a way, after the French Revolution. . .

"But the buildings were not in ruins then. She regained all but one."

"It took her twenty years to do it. Thirty before everything was restored to its former order and the Community together again. Perhaps within twenty years—or thirty—"

Talked 'Restoration'

I tried to speak with conviction. As a matter of fact, I did not feel entirely hopeless. But my hopes were without form and substance until I had talked with Mere Martina and Mere Claire, the two nuns who had been with Mere Marie Aimee when she died. As she lay dying, she did not talk about the destruction of the Abbaye, according to Mere Claire and Mere Martina. She talked about its restoration.

"Its restoration!" I exclaimed. "Why, it is completely ruined!"

"Yes, but she had so much faith that she believed it could be rebuilt. She even drew a little sketch, with a detailed plan for such reconstruction."

"They showed it to me. It was a very practical plan. But then, Mere Marie Aimee had always been practical. However, this was not wholly because of her sound sense. It was largely because she had so much faith.

"She made us promise to keep this sketch. She asked us to pray every night that the plan might become a reality."

"Yes, but how?" I asked.

"We thought you might help. In fact, we are counting on you. But others would help too."

"What others?" I asked. But I already knew what they meant—that there is always Saint Therese herself, that there is always her "Little Way."

In Memory

It is with this knowledge and the hope it gives me that I have written a new Prologue to my story which has also undergone indicated revision. The original Prologue was written in the refectory which is destroyed, looking out on the flowering courtyard which has been laid waste. The original dedication too has lost much of its meaning. The Prioress to whom it was inscribed was killed in the bombardment and so were twenty members of that Community "in whose midst I dwelt . . ." I can offer the book in its new form only to their memory.

Only? It is a great and glorious memory! And time has not dimmed it, any more than it has dimmed the memory of the first day that I went knocking at their door. I still seem to see them all very clearly, just as I saw them in the flesh when I dwelt among them. But I seem to see Mere Marie Aimee most clearly of all. And I do pray every night that her plan may become a reality and her faith be fulfilled; that the land given by the Conqueror shall not fall into impious hands and that the buildings beatified by a Saint shall not vanish from among the sanctuaries of the earth.

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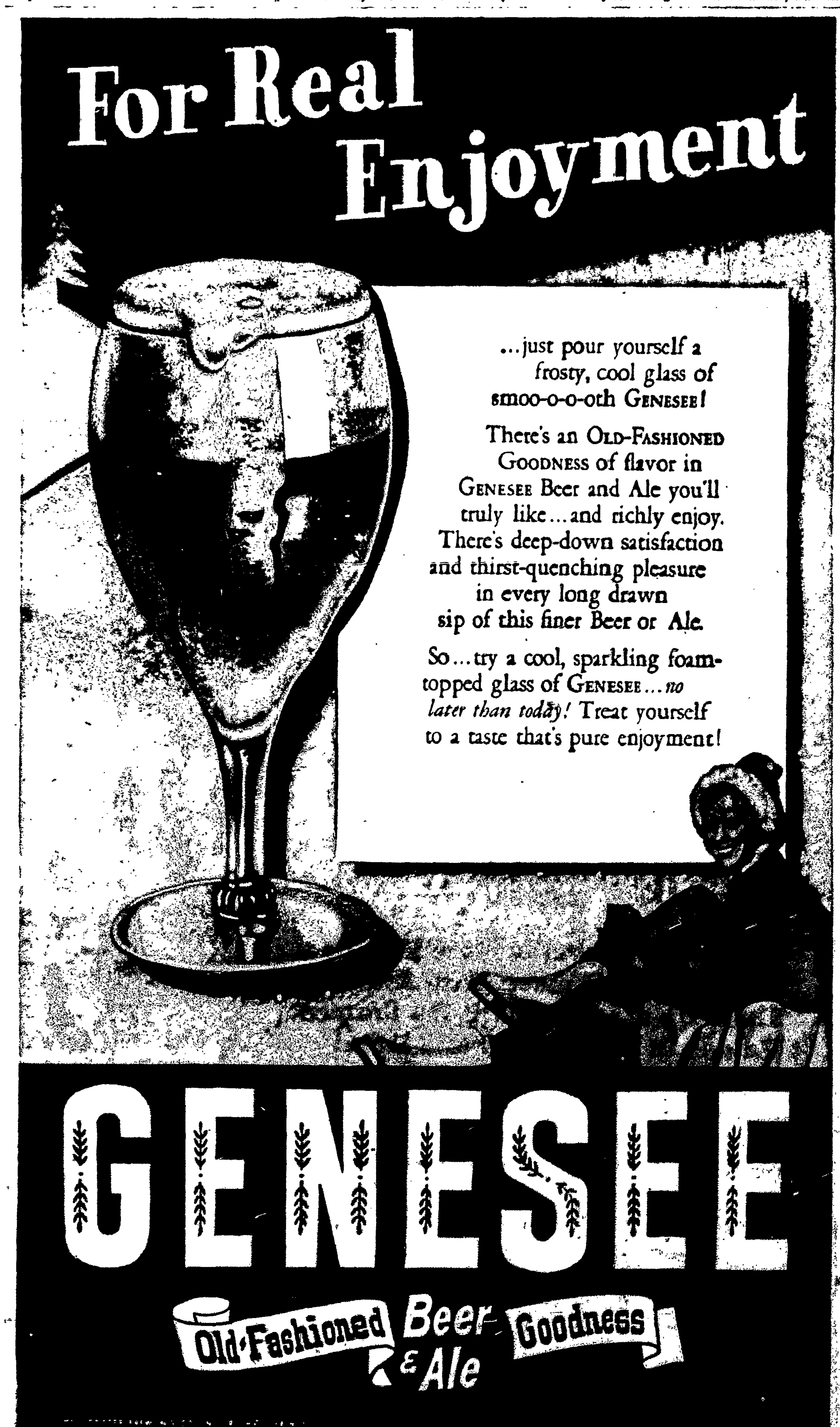
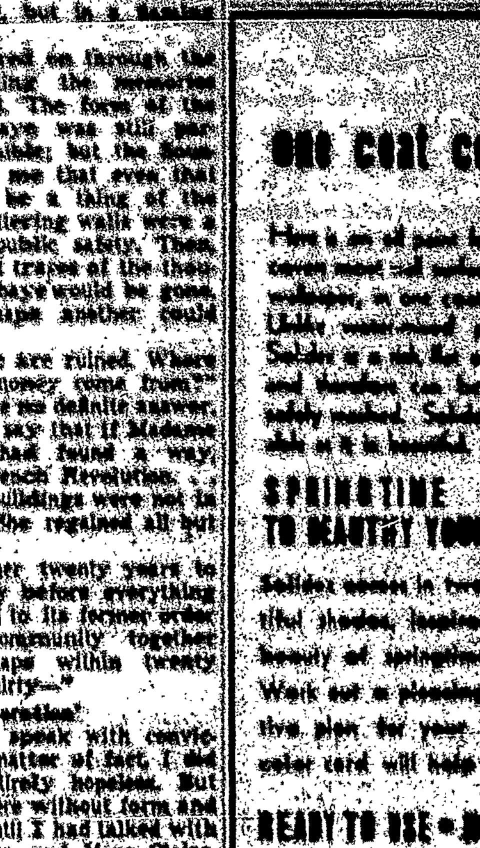
'Iron Curtain' Bishop

Vatican City — (NC) — Bishop Adolph Szelazek of Luck has died (February 10). Luck, formerly part of Poland, has been incorporated into Russia since the end of the war. The 84-year-old Bishop had been severely hampered in his ministry by the Soviets.





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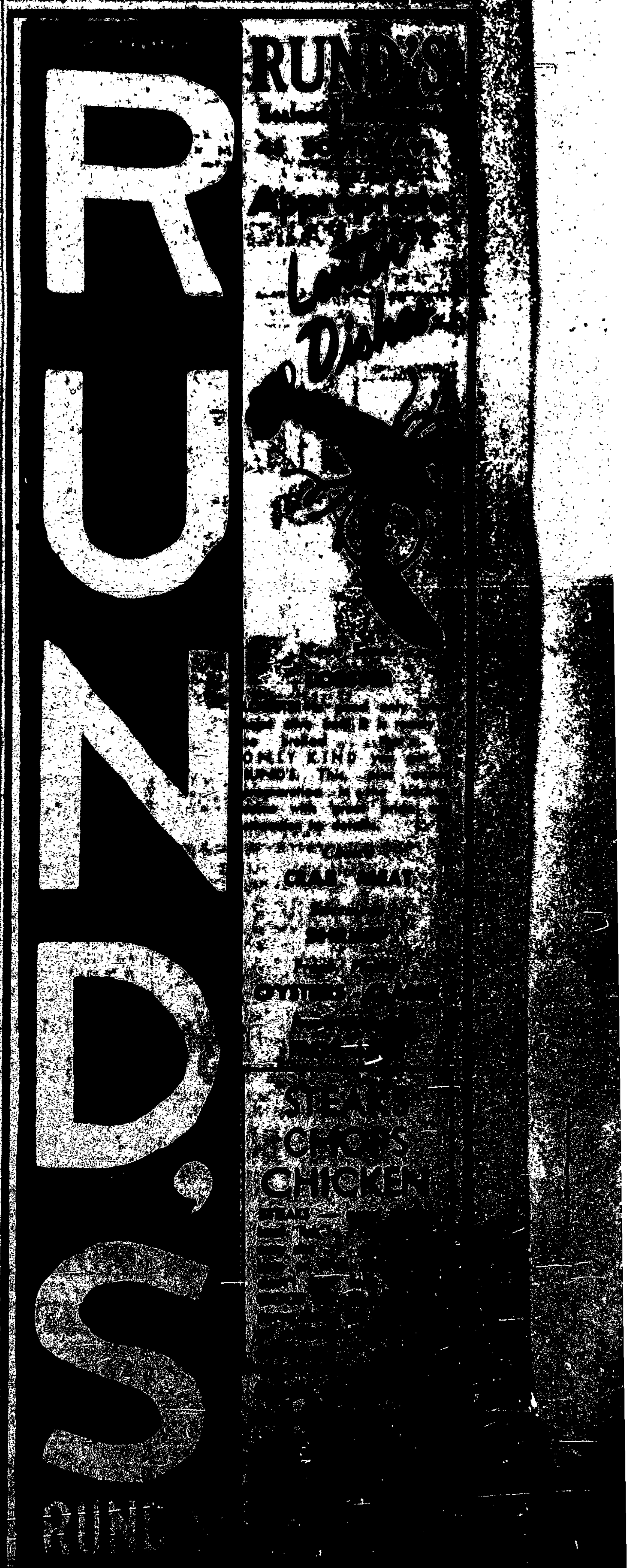

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