



Soixante-Quinze

A Tale of Paris in War-Time

By MONA CLEAVER

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A FAVORITE resort in student days was the little shop in the Rue de l'Ecole, where, amidst their ancient furniture, their bits of old glass and silver and ivory, Madame and Mademoiselle padded about heavily in their soft shoes and tenderly handled each treasure. There was no name over the door of the little shop and we always spoke of it by its street number, which has since come to have so very different a significance—soixante-quinze. Stout old Madame was simply "Madame" and stout middle-aged Mademoiselle just "Mademoiselle," save when, in playful spirit, we designated them as Madame Soixante-Quinze and Mademoiselle Soixante-Quinze.

Within the memory of some members of our little colony there had been a Monsieur Soixante-Quinze, tall, distinguished-looking and of a wondrous grace of manner.

"Ah, a gentleman and a connoisseur was Monsieur," Madame used to say, "He came of a noble family."

Indeed, the relics of that noble family had formed the nucleus of the stock-in-trade with which Madame, a bride, had set up business when she found that her middle-aged husband had scant idea of making a living for both or either of them.

Proud of her handsome, high-born husband, and determined never to drag his distinguished name through the market-place, the business had been carried on, as far as could be, namelessly, and, in a modest way it had prospered.

"How gloriously Monsieur did fare," declared an old-timer in the colony. "He never lacked for the choicest of foods and the rarest of wines and Madame's cooking was a marvel."

There was little outer show of prosperity during my student days. Madame moved laboriously about the shop, her great bulk enveloped in an old gray peignoir half covered by a black sateen apron, and Mademoiselle patterned her own dress and appearance on her mother's. But both were kind and good and when we of the colony had money we bought odd pieces of furniture to deck our studios or quaint old bits of coral and silver for our own wear. When times were hard Madame soon knew for these purchases ceased. Sometimes the treasures returned to Soixante-Quinze and more than once Madame had been known to proffer a generous loan.

It was with some misgiving that I approached Soixante-Quinze in war time. There had been so many changes. Perhaps the little shop had closed; perhaps—but, straining my eyes from the street-corner I deciphered the familiar 65, and soon the cluttered little shop window came in view and with a real heart-throb I recognized a curious old seal that had been in the window years before; a darkened and dismal portrait, treasured by Madame but unappreciated by the public, occupied the central position and close to the glass was spread a beautiful ivory fan on which exquisite Chinese ladies paraded unendingly over carven bridges, and gazed upon lacy waterfalls. Floods of recollection surged through my mind at the sight of these well-remembered objects. I recalled the sage advice of Madame, the kindly services of Mademoiselle and the ready sympathy of both, which had brightened many a dark day, and the spirit of it all seemed soaked into the inanimate intricacies of seal and picture and fan. Then I touched the latch and the old door creaked on its hinges, while, from a corner where she sat mending a frayed length of yellowed lace, Madame came forward. For a moment she gazed, incredulously, then advanced, holding out both hands and bursting into incoherent exclamations of astonishment and welcome. Tears

started from her old eyes and she drew me to a seat while she wiped them away with the corner of her apron. She looked at me earnestly and shook her head from side to side, wanting to know how I dared cross the ocean at such a terrible time.

"Oh," she wailed, throwing out her hands, and then striking them together tragically, "If I had known you were on the ocean I should have been filled with terror."

SHE called Mademoiselle and while we greeted one another and laughed and almost cried over our reminiscences, the mother rocked herself back and forward, raising her arms and shaking her head. Finally she interrupted our conversation, and this silent demonstration of her own to take from a pocket in her apron, while tears started again from her honest brown eyes, a folded paper with a wide border of black. It was the announcement of a soldier's funeral.

"He was my nephew," she said, and, again wiping away the tears, turned simply to other things and began to smile with me over her latest acquisitions in silver and lace and ivory. Lovingly she fingered an embroidered fire screen in a frame of carved ivory; some wonderful miniatures and ancient mirrors were proudly exhibited and when I had exclaimed over each she thought I must be tired and begged me to have tea.

Mademoiselle came out from behind an enormous dresser filled with old crystal and silver and we followed her back into the alcove it formed. A round table covered with a cloth of printed linen bore white and gold cups, a long crusty loaf, tender brioches, babas and pastries from Boissiere's as well as a jar of jam sent by a relative from Alsace and made from a sort of prune grown in that province. Over the tea-cups we talked of our old friends of the surrounding studios, most of them gone now, but still some struggling on through all the hardships of a war-time Paris. We recalled the happenings of student days and laughed now over their small tragedies. We talked, too, of the war, and of the soldier nephew whose funeral was to take place next day and Madame's eyes grew round with horror, as she told of the sufferings of her country people in the north.

The next day Mademoiselle went to the funeral. The train journey of nearly an hour lay through a country glorious with springtime. Villages lay in the midst of blooming chestnut and Judas trees; plane trees neatly encircled the public places and cottage doorways were festooned with clustering wistaria and perfumed with the heavy plumes of white and purple lilacs.

The ancient churchyard, where the friends and relatives gathered lay beneath the shade of two wide-

THERE is hardly a tiny shop in the smallest out-of-the-way street in Paris that has not been influenced by the war. The favorite resorts in student days are cloaked to-day in a different atmosphere. "C'est la guerre!"—It is the war!—is the *raison d'être* for all things.

"Soixante-Quinze" is a touching, human little narrative of the war-time fortune of one Madame and the attendant romance of Mademoiselle. Miss Cleaver tells it tersely and with compelling interest.

—THE EDITORS.

spreading cedars of Lebanon, and their far-reaching branches drew the black-clad mourners into a huddled cluster of gloom contrasting strangely with the golden-green of springtime and the swaying masses of bloom beyond. Even the flower-decked graves outside the border of shadow looked bright and gay and Mademoiselle sighed and wiped her eyes as, bowed over her rosary, she listened to the solemn words of the priest.

Presently it was all over, and relatives who had not seen one another for long, kissed on each cheek and mingled their tears. They talked in hushed tones of the war, of others who had fallen and of those who would yet fall.

Mademoiselle went to the new-made mound and gazed down upon the flowers which covered it and upon the *gardien du cimetière*, who, as he rearranged the wreaths looked up and said:

"Ah, Mademoiselle, to-morrow a soldier will be buried here who will have no flowers on his grave for we have not been able to find a single one of his relatives. He

came from the country which is invaded."

THE next day I was at Soixante-Quinze again, fingering Madame's treasures, buying a few and admiring many. She was offering me a teapot for inspection, saying softly, as she stroked its smooth surface, "It feels like silver and it looks like silver, does it not, Mademoiselle? But it is not silver; I was deceived in it," when Mademoiselle came in, dressed for the street, and the old mother almost dropped the teapot in her surprise. It was seldom, indeed, that either of the two went out, and to go two days in succession was an unheard of digression from their simple routine.

"I told you about the other soldier—who will have no flowers," Mademoiselle explained, "I am going to take flowers for his grave."

Madame swayed her head heavily from side to side, and her old eyes filled again with the all-too-frequent tears. Then she nodded and patted her daughter's hand.

"May I not go with you Mademoiselle?" I asked, and receiving permission, we started out together and stopped first at the nearest market. Under its cover sort, fish, vegetables and flowers. One even more than usually vociferous vendeuse thrust a large and velvety bunch of pansies under Mademoiselle's nose and she stopped, saying to me,

"Ah, Mademoiselle, les pensées!"

"Your word for them is so beautiful, Mademoiselle," I said, "Pensées for thoughts. Let us take some of them."

These, with blue masses of forget-me-nots, white valley-lilies and other blooms filled our basket, and last of all, Mademoiselle bought a little rose tree, with the explanation:

"So that something will bloom there always."

UNDER the big cedar tree we found the priest and the *gardien du cimetière*, and the burial service was read. Mademoiselle had just laid the flowers on the mound, and was planting the little rose tree with a trowel when a limping, uniformed figure came stumbling along the path in futile haste. The newcomer spoke to the *gardien du cimetière* in a low voice and then came to stand reverently by the grave and to lay upon it a tightly-bound cluster of lilies of the valley. I smiled at the pathetic posy—so like one a child would pick in the woods. Mademoiselle looked up in surprise.

"Monsieur," she said, "I beg your pardon. I understood that there were no friends or relatives. I hope I do not intrude."

"Ah, no, Mademoiselle," the wounded soldier responded. "I have no claim but that of my indebtedness. I came only to pay a tribute to a brave comrade. I was his sergeant, Mademoiselle; I was wounded and, in bringing me to a place of safety, he was wounded worse than I. For weeks he lay in a hospital—where, I could not find—and I lay in another hospital and only learned to-day that he had gone."

HE looked down at Mademoiselle where she knelt, trowel in hand, listening, admiration in her every expression and sympathy beaming from her kindly eyes as they fell upon his stout stick and the poor, twisted leg whose work it supplemented. "Ah, Mademoiselle," he went on, "But you are kind and good to bring these flowers to the grave of an unknown soldier. I know not where his relatives are or they would thank you, and I, his comrade, do thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Then we all sat in the shade of the fragrant lilac tree, and the soldier told us, in glowing words, the story of the great charge in which he had been wounded and his come so close to life and action before. From the quiet little shop where only rumors of the great world drifted in and were discussed at the round tea-table behind the contact with throbbing, striving, eager life—life that keenly for that proximity. And as she listened her eyes gleamed and her face flushed with excitement. When the hero had finished his story she gathered courage to tell him of her cousin, wounded months before and only now lying at rest under the flowers and earth of the near-by mound.

"He was never able to talk to us," she said, "Or doubtless he would have told us much." Then she told him of his regiment.

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