

A Municipal Pawnshop and its Part in the Great War

As showing something of the human side of war — the magnificent patriotism and love of those left behind in the face of adversity and the part that a municipal pawnshop plays in alleviating the distress caused by the great tragedy, the following splendid article by John N. Raphael, taken from the London Daily Telegraph is illuminating. —Ed.

Parisians call the municipal pawnshop "The Mountain of Piety" officially, and unofficially, affectionately almost, they call it "Ma Tante"—Auntie. The affection is well merited. The municipal pawnshop of Paris, which has branches all over the city, does not hide shamefacedly up back streets or in lonely corners. It welcomes everybody, great or small, in need of much or of little money. It lends large or small sums at a fair rate of interest, on everything or anything; in this time of stress and trouble it is a very real help, and no Parisian is at all ashamed of calling upon "Auntie."

A woman and a wounded soldier were talking, anxiously, eagerly, and excitedly, in a corner of the courtyard. There was a bundle in a perambulator beside them. The man in his faded, war-stained uniform had brought the bundle to Auntie's door, but he did not want to go in. He was giving his last instructions to his wife, how much to ask, how little to take, and the woman was trying her best to be brave. "We shall get it out when I come back," he said, and patted her shoulder. As the door closed behind her he looked at his bandaged arm and shook his head. I offered him a cigarette. "Thank you," he said, "all the same, but I dare not begin smoking again — just yet. Tobacco runs away with so much money." I gave him all my cigarettes. "It will be all right when she comes out again," I said. He laughed and nodded, as he took them — "Yes, and my arm is nearly well again—and then—" said he.

It was a Saturday afternoon, and Saturday is a day on which "Auntie" shows her brighter side. For Sundays follow every Saturday even in war time, and on Saturday afternoons Parisians who have been forced to have recourse to "Auntie's" help make shift to withdraw many things as soon as they have received their week's wages. So the deagagements counter was crowded, and there was happiness on the faces of the waiting crowd, which sat expectant on the benches opposite. "Le 23" called a little old man in a skull cap. A young man, a boy almost, took his number and his money to the desk. He got another number, and as he danced off into the next room to wait for his bicycle, "I shall put it in again on Monday," he said to the room at large. "I shall not want it again after Monday, till the war is over. "Je pars, moi, la semaine prochaine!"

Human Side of War.

In the next room, where the redeemed articles were delivered, a little woman was struggling with a big bundle. It was bedding, and an old man waiting for his own parcel helped her to tie it into a black cloth. "My husband has a fortnight's convalescent leave, and he comes home tomorrow," she murmured, as she thanked him. "He would have missed his bed, and I am glad to have it."

But it is the Salle des Engagements, the room where things are pawned, that the Mont de Piété contains the real essence of the human side of war, comedy and tragedy both. There is not very much comedy, but here at the end of a bench near the door are two mininettes in fits of laughter. The one evidently came to keep the other company, and they had brought a clock to pawn. It was a very ugly clock, a black marble contraption adorned with gilt warriors and leaves. "What is the use of a clock?" said its owner, defiantly. "Is not the time long enough like that?" "Oh," said the other, "he will soon be home again." "He has promised to bring me a Boche helmet if he can," laughed her friend. Then her number was called, the clock travelled up to the counter, and disappeared into the mysterious inner room behind the screen where the valuing is done. "Et alors?" said the girl. "Your number will be called, and, at the same time, the amount we are prepared to give," said the clerk at the counter. She went and sat down again. Her friend remarked, "Let us hope they will pay for it by weight." Presently from the room of mystery a voice was heard: "Le numero deux cent soixante-quinze, treize francs cinquante." "Ah, non!" said the girl indignantly. "It is a hot day, and I have no money to pay for a taxi, I!" "Fifteen francs," said the voice, for even chez Ma Tante bargaining is not unusual. "Bien," said the girl, and went up to the cash desk for

her money. "I shall send him tobacco, a five-franc note, and a bottle of iodine," she said to her friend as she took it. "And I," said the other girl, "will send him a box of sardines and a lock of your hair."

The pale woman in deep mourning had a child with her. There were only two men in the room, and nearly every woman had one or more children. One, obviously a grandmother, had four, and one little girl clutched a shabby doll. "You won't give him my dolly, grâ'mere?" the child kept on saying, "you won't give Anne-Marie to the gentleman?" "But, no, my little foolish one, no," said the old lady, and patted the square parcel which was on the seat beside her. "These will be quite enough. Papa does not want them while he is at the war, and we will get them for him again before he comes back." And the old woman sighed. One wondered what "these" were. Some of them were clothes, undoubtedly, and the box was not heavy. The old woman and the children, hatless and aproned, all of them, were very evidently poor, and very, very neat. The pale woman in mourning had two old pistols, a sword, and a picture in a heavy gold frame. "Can you take the picture out, and let me leave the frame only?" she whispered. "Mais parfaitement, Madame," said the kindly old man at the counter. "It is a good frame." There was some whispering in the room of mystery behind. A face peeped out and was withdrawn. "Have you, perhaps, anything else, Madame?" said the old clerk, coming back. The woman fumbled in her dress, while everybody made a point of looking away discreetly. She slipped a thin gold chain off her neck, pushed it across the counter, and whispered brokenly, "The medal is of silver." There was more murmuring of voices in the room behind. The old clerk came out with a number, and I am certain he patted the woman's hand as he gave it to her. Presently the voice from the valuing-room called, "Le numero 293. Quatre-vingt-dix francs!" "Ah, merci, Monsieur," said the woman in black. "You can release any part of them when you wish," said the cashier as he handed her the money. She nodded, wiped her eyes and hurried out. "The wife of an officer," whispered my neighbor.

Secret and Sweet Charity.

One of the two men in the room was an Italian. Everyone had, of course, to show his papers. He produced his mobilization order. "I want to pay my rent before I go in case," he said in broken French. And then another woman, in black, came to the counter. Two little children tugged at her shabby dress. There was no crepe on it, but it was black, and very, very worn and shabby. The children were in black, both of them, and the poor woman's face wore its mourning quite plainly. "Eh bien, Madame," said the old clerk, not unkindly, but briskly, for she stood at the counter without speaking a word, and the other man present, a well-to-do-looking, white-haired, white-bearded old boy, in good clothes, was, apparently, waiting. "Eh bien, Madame?" The woman looked about her, furtively almost. The old man behind her understood — it is wonderful how people do understand just now — turned and examined a poster on the wall opposite. The woman seemed to be wringing her hands. "For these little ones," she muttered, and slipped a worn wedding-ring over to the clerk. She did not leave the counter when the ring was taken in, but stood looking at her hand as though she had hurt it, as well as her heart.

The room was nearly empty now. "Madame," the prosperous-looking old man said, "my two sons are at the war. Keep your ring. Say 'Non' when they make you their offer. Borrow this money from me instead. See, here is my dead wife's ring on my chain. I wear it always. She might have been the grandmother of these two little ones. There is no shame. See—" "Dix-neuf francs!" said the old man firmly. And the poor woman looked at him so gratefully, but could not speak. He slipped a bank note into her hand, took the ring from the clerk, and gave it back to her, and "Here is my card," he said. "You shall pay me when you can." I don't know whether he had come to "Auntie" for business or for charity. There is much charity by stealth in Paris nowadays. He pawned nothing, but hurried off. The woman remained in the middle of the room for an appreciable moment. Then she kissed both the children. Then she slipped the worn ring on her finger again and kissed that. She looked at the banknote, and at the card in her hand. The note was £2—50f. She turned the card over and over. There was neither address nor name on it. It was quite blank. "Monsieur!" she called aloud, and sobbed. "But I cannot — Monsieur!"