Housekeeping in the Latin Quarter

The Interesting Experiences Of a California Couple In the Student Center of Paris

By Adelaide Soule

WHEN we arrived in Paris and announced our intention of keeping house our friends, long domiciled in the heart of the Latin quarter, applauded our resolve.

"It is the only way to live," they said. "Paris pensions are notoriously bad, and of course you don't want to stay at a hotel. You must live in the quartier Latin. The other side of the river is the American section, and there you will hear hardly a word of French. All the Californians live here. You know the M——s from Berkeley? They are just around the corner in the Rue des Feuillantines. And the C——s and the R. W——s are only two blocks away, near Montparnasse. And you remember S—— of Stanford? Well, he's right here in the Rue de St. Jacques."

I put my hands to my head.

"Pardon me," I said in bewilderment, "but where am I? I was under the impression that this was Paris."

"So it is," laughed our friends, "the Paris of the Californians. Americans from Maine or Massachusetts may live in the hotels and tenements on the other side of the Seine. But Californians are wise. They setle down here in the student quarter, where you see the real life of the Parisian. There are so many of us that we have crowded out a good many of the original inhabitants, who have fled to Montmatre."

"Do you remember," broke in another interested Californian, "when Sam Haight and Charlie Dutton from Berkeley made their comet-like transit of Europe, 'hitting only the high places,' as they expressed it? Well, the telegram announcing their arrival in Paris preceded them by less than two hours, but when they reached here at 7 o'clock in the evening they found a dinner party of 10 Californians awaiting them, and probably 20 more dropped in during the evening. You can't throw a stone on the Boulevard St. Michel from Claude Bernard to the Luxembourg without hitting a Californian."

We found this to be literally true, and it accounts for the ease with which newcomers glide into the life of the Latin quarter and absorb its traditions and atmosphere without really knowing that they are doing so.

After some search we decided upon a tiny apartment in the Rue des Ursulines, near the Jardin du Luxembourg and the picturesque old Rue de St. Jacques. This is one of the most interesting parts of Paris. Formerly a region of monasteries many of the buildings date from priestly times, and the crumbling archways that lead into dim old courts were formerly the entrances to monasteries and convents.

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A little way from us, down the Rue de St. Jacques, were the church and hospital of Val de Grace, founded by Anne of Austria in gratitude for the birth of Louis XIV. Our windows looked out upon the dome of the hospital, and we often passed it on our way up to Montparnasse, where we frequented a certain bathing establishment. Our maison, although modern in most of its details, had no bathroom. It is true, we might have had a bath brought to us—in a wagon! But the idea of taking the public into our confidence to this extent was rather appalling, and after all it was no worse to go out to bathe than to dine once one was used to it.

We would walk down St. Jacques, thinking of the million feet, courtly, priestly and plebian, that before us had walked its narrow pavement and stepped into the gutters to avoid each passerby. It is said that Anne of Austria brought to Val de Grace with her own hands the heart of her little grandchild, and deposited it in the sanctuary. We used to stop before the hospital court to ponder over this scene, wondering whether the queen came alone, weeping for the little dead child, or at the head of a glittering procession, royal grief hidden under royal pomp and splendor. We always meant some day to visit the crypt where the hearts of the royal family were interred, but somehow we never got to it.

Almost at our door was the Jardin du Luxembourg. Two short blocks took us to the entrance by the observatory—that entrance through which poor Marshal Ney was carried to the carrefour de l'observatoire, where he was executed. We never passed his statue without pausing for a sympathetic upward glance at the heroic figure of "the bravest of the brave," with its flourish, wholly French, yet singularly touching; its reiterated "Shoot here, my comrades!" echoing down the decades. Still with its hand on its heart, we seemed to see the heroic figure sink to earth and lie there, strangely quiet, and we gazed upon it, pitiful and saddened, as though that fall and that quiet were of today. Of all the sad histories of the Latin quarter, that of the execution of Marshal Ney remains the saddest and most intimate.

But not to get too far away from our "appartement" in the Rue des Ursulines. Our initial expenses in setting up housekeeping were $5. This covered dishes, cutlery, coals, kindling and the first breakfast.

The apartment consisted of two rooms and a kitchenette. Most of the kitchen room was taken up by an enormous earthen ware stove. It had three ovens—a large, a medium and a very small one, so that one quite comfortably might have conducted a barbecue, a Christmas dinner or a light breakfast for two over the charcoal blaze.

"What am I to do with this thing?" I asked, looking at it in dismay.

"Use it as a storeroom," said my practical friend. "We keep our bread in the small oven, our vegetables in the second and our coals in the big one. Get a gas shelf to cook on."

What the Parisians call coals are little black eggs of some not too inflammable material that by the exercise of patience and skill, may be coaxed to burn. We were unable to cope with them, and had to pay the man of all work a sou a day to light our living room fire.

The economical French fill two-thirds of the grate with bricks and in the remaining space make the smallest conceivable fire with twigs and these little "boulets." Our landlord looked positively pained every time he came into our rooms and saw a hundred or more boulets glowing in one mass, even though we bought them through him and he, of course, got his "petit benefice."

Marketing takes a great deal of time in Paris. Each morning I bought my supplies, visiting half a dozen different shops and waiting my turn with 20 other housewives. Once, when I bought a whole pound of coffee, my grocer earnestly advised me to have only a portion ground and to bring it back to him from time to time, when he would grind it for me.

Marketing takes a great deal of time in Paris

My breakfast purchases were always the same. Crisp petits pains, warm from the oven, a little pot of cream, a tiny jar of confiture and a handful of roasted chestnuts for a relish. Incidentally, I picked up a good deal of colloquial French. My milkwoman and I, for instance, had a stock dialogue that each carried out with the greatest gravity.

After the statement by me and admission by madame that the weather continued "villain," she would add in a tone of surprise and admiration:

"But it is marvelous how Madame advances herself in the French language!"

To which I, modestly: "Not at all; not at all. Madame is too amiable."

She: "But truly, Madame deceives herself. It is marvelous how she speaks. It is like that always with the Americans. They are not like the Germans, for example, or the English, who can not learn a language. But these Americans! Mon dieu! It is, as one says, a marvel! Behold! One enters. He demands, in English, the milk, the eggs, the butter. The next day he has two words of French. The next, ten. At the end of a month, behold, Monsieur l'Americain speaks like a Parisian!"

One would have sworn she believed it.

For luncheon, another trip to the markets was necessary. The Quartier is full of Patisseries, Boulangeries, Rotisseries, Cuisines Publiques. The pastry shops are always crowded. As Americans frequent ice cream parlors, so French women seek the patisserie, where the most delicious little cakes are sold. They are hot from the oven at about 4 in the afternoon, and then the rooms are particularly crowded with women sitting at small tables, enjoying cakes and cafe noir.

STREET CHILDREN OF PARIS

We took our dinners out. Sometimes we went to Thackeray's, a quaint little eating house, more English than French, where it is claimed the English novelist was wont to dine. Sometimes we went to Hubin's, a very old place, well known to Parisians and little known to foreigners, as witness that they served a dinner of six courses, with champagne, for 65 cents. The Hubins prepare sole after a famous recipe of their own, with an incomparable sauce composed of shrimps, mushrooms, truffles and half a dozen other ingredients. The dish is deservedly celebrated.

Some times we took our dinners out.

Occasionally—not often—we would go to some great restaurant decorated in the American fashion, and would be served very good dishes by waiters who spoke very good English, and would listen to the chatter of the crowds of Americans, who fancied that they were dining in Paris. Two-thirds of them probably went away without ever having seen Paris, much less having dined with her.

For the most part, we preferred "Madame's," in the Boulevard St. Michel, below the Luxembourg. "On the Boule Mich, near the Lux," was the way the Californians directed one to the place. It was a decent little dining room, hid behind a vestibule, an office and a sitting room, where one might warm his chilled fingers before going in to dine.

The same people came night after night. French and American students of the Sorbonne and the Ecole des Beaux Arts, singers, musicians, a few sophisticated tourists and a predominance of true Parisians. Much was done besides dining. Politics was discussed, student escapades planned, the latest plays criticised, the coming immurment of the candidates for the Grand Prix de Rome discussed in all its bearings. Every one, without thought of payment, gave of his best in the way of music, songs or dancing. Some one was always cutting pigeon wings in the sitting room, or strumming on a guitar or coaxing the husky little piano to whisper an accompaniment. It was simple, natural and friendly beyond words to describe.

Each newcomer was subtly tried out and judgment was passed by the habitues. If he was not satisfactory, he encountered a sudden difficulty in getting his orders attended to. If this did not discourage him, he came some night to find his place occupied by a friend of one of the regular patrons, and this continued until he gave up in despair.

We had been warned of what we might expect. On the first night a crowd of students surrounded my husband, demanding a lesson in English. He gave it, promptly and vigorously. His volunteer pupils were pale from exhaustion, much rumpled as to hair and necktie, when the lesson was over. Afterward he was occasionally appealed to upon some point of pronunciation or construction, but never for another lesson!

"Shades of Napoleon, what a lesson!" gasped one of the students. "The whole English language, with all its enormities, all its grotesqueries, crammed down our throats in one unhappy evening. But he is a terrible man, your husband, madam!"

The terrible man himself became a student of the Sorbonne, and I should not dare to betray the student pranks the erstwhile dignified American condoned, if he did not actually participate in them.

As for me, I must have been accepted at madame's by virtue of his popularity, unless I won tolerance by my meek acceptance of the attentions of madame's aged husband and madame's angora cat, Nonette. The first proffered peppermint lozenges, the second a freshly caught and very lively mouse.

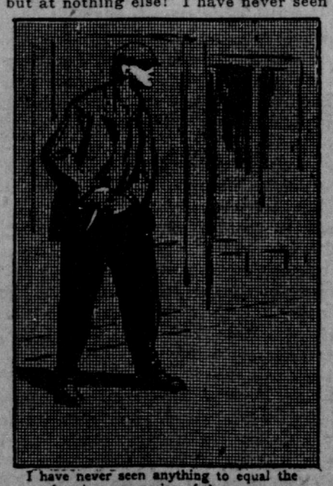
Paris, by the way, is a convenient place. If you have mice in your "apartment"—and you are likely to—you may hire a cat for a fortnight. Pussy arrives in a wicker basket and sets to work at once in a business-like manner. When her mission of destruction is ended you pay her wages and send her home.

We had been specially warned against certain narrow, winding streets in our neighborhood, but more than once curiosity or a desire for bargains to be found in the innumerable pawnshops drew us into the danger zone.

These winding alleys that once followed the curve of the town wall are a part of very old Paris. They look more Italian than French, with low, arched doorways and narrow passages leading to sinister courts. Every other window seems that of a wine shop. Stalls for the sale of horse, donkey and mule meat abound. The odors are those of Italy—roasting chestnuts, spilled wine and a pervading undercurrent of garlic.

In one street, said to be a special haunt of les Apaches, as the Paris toughs are called, were hundreds of idle men. There were at that time, so the papers said, 150,000 unemployed men in Paris.

Among these peasant faces, cheerful, sullen or passively waiting, were some that brought the heart to the throat—such faces as may have peered gleefully from door and window at passing tumbrils in the days of the revolution; such faces as may have brightened to see the heads fall then, and might brighten again at the sight of blood—but at nothing else! I have never seen anything to equal the ferocious expression of some of these men.



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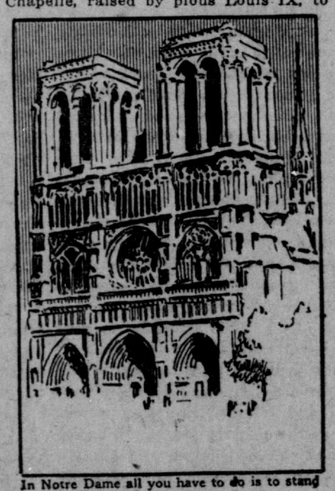
It was a comfort to come to an open space and the little fifteenth century church of St. Medard, famous at one time as a rendezvous of the convulsionaires. It is said that sometimes 500 or 600 persons would be in spasms in the little churchyard. The old church, with its flying buttresses and extreme Gothic decorations, has a wild and fantastic air, as though it had taken its part in these convulsive orgies and had never quite forgotten the days of its madness. It seems a very feminine church, which might go off into hysterics at any moment.

All over Paris church and convent buildings were being torn down and the stones carted away. We foresaw that when we should come to Paris again there would be fewer of the picturesque, Gothic churches and walled, deserted convent yards; more wide streets and open squares. We used to stand, regretfully watching this destruction, and then, for comfort, would seek the Sainte Chapelle of Notre Dame, secure in the thought that they, at least, would endure. In fact, we never passed Notre Dame without a peep into its dusky grandeur, where vagrant bars of color from the great windows wander, as though lost, among the labyrinth of columns. The little Sainte Chapelle, raised by pious Louis IX, to shelter his wondrous relics, is like a jewel, with its Gothic architecture and marvelous stained glass; but with beauty its charm ends. There is no atmosphere, as at Notre Dame. Most interesting things have happened in it, but you do not realize them. In Notre Dame, all you have to do is to stand silent and watch history pass down the shadowy aisles. Kings, churchmen, populace, coronations, ceremonies, desecrations, saintly processions and the mad carmagnole, all pass swiftly in review, and you stumble out of the twilight, a twilight aglow with color, as alive with history, and blink with astonishment at the cold white day in the square outside.

SAINT-ETIENNE DU MONT, WHERE CHILDLESS WOMEN PRAY



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One day after leaving Notre Dame, we found ourselves in need of luncheon. As we threaded the dark and narrow streets leading up from the Seine, we considered the question in all its bearings. We might stop at a public kitchen, like the ragged boy at our elbow, and buy a cone of steaming French fried potatoes, to be eaten on the bridge looking down at the hurrying water. Or we might go to a patisserie and have coffee and little cakes fresh from the oven. While we debated, we passed a wine shop. The door swung wide, and a delicious odor of soup—soup thick with cabbage and rich with garlic—rushed out to us. We instantly went in.

It was a small place, fairly clean. The floor was sanded and a cage of canaries hung in the window.

"Could one have dejeuner?" we asked.

Madame assured us that one could. Madame would serve us herself. And to commence, there was soup.

Of course we would have soup.

Each table was cut traversely by a loaf of bread considerably longer than the table was wide. As a concession to our quality, a napkin was spread to receive our plates. We had an excellent luncheon—soup, roast, a vegetable, cheese, biscuit and red wine—for a franc apiece. As we ate, the canaries sang and madame hovered near, in a short petticoat and a hastily donned cap that made amends for other deficiencies of costume.

We were struck by the good manners of the other diners, all of the working class. There were covert glances of curiosity, but not one open stare, and the conversation, so far as we could understand it, was good humored and innocent.

There was no waiter to tip, so when we paid we gave back to madame a part of the change.

"For the birds," we said gravely, and she bowed with equal dignity. "It shall be devoted to their interest," she assured us, and we parted with mutual politeness.

It was not a great adventure, but it had a faintly Stevensonian flavor that put us in good humor for the day.

Another favorite haunt of ours was the Marche du Temple—a daily sale of second hand articles. It is a counterpart of the rag fair in Rome, except that most of the booths are under cover.

I think there must always have been a market held at this place, for the oldest maps and books on Paris mention the ancient Marche du Temple. Perhaps, in very old times, when the towers and citadel of the templars stood on this ground, the people were permitted to congregate and sell their wares. Such customs, once established, die hard in Europe. The great markets at Les Halles are the outgrowth of an ancient permission to sell certain articles at that point.

Just to the right of the Temple market lies a little park with a shallow pond, where birds come in flocks to drink. It taxes the imagination to stand in this quiet enclosure and realize that here stood the famous "Temple"—the last remaining tower of the original eight or nine—where Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, Mme. Elizabeth and the two royal children passed so many tragic months. As well as one knows the pathetic details of their captivity a sense of bewilderment and unreality is the only result of standing on the ground where their prison stood. Here, as we are told, the little dauphin, given over to the brutal Simon, sickened and died. Here the daughter of Louis XVI, the only member of the royal family who was spared, came back as the duchess d'Angouleme and planted a willow tree in the square of the Temple, as a souvenir of the unhappy past.

We searched diligently for the willow tree, but could not find it. Perhaps we walked in the very steps of Louis XVI as he was led away to execution, but no inkling of it reached us. The Napoleons, in destroying the temple, may not have been able to blot out history, but certainly they have blurred the picture. If one stone of the old prison remained as a mute witness to the grim past it would be easy to reconstruct the tower and to people it; to see the king, the saintly Elizabeth and the fair, proud queen going forth, in turn, to worse imprisonment and death. But nothing remains to hint of those who went out to die or those who remained to suffer. The story is ended. The page has been turned, and we see now only a commonplace little square, where sparrows squabble in the dirty pool and cabmen wrangle at the gate.

When all is said and done, the best way to see Paris is from the top of an omnibus. If you choose an autobus you feel like Julius Caesar making a triumphal progress. You race down narrow streets, whisk around corners and graze under arches with true royal recklessness. When your auto "bucks" the crowds in the boulevards, you have all the sinful joy of a football scrimmage without the danger to yourself. There is danger and to spare for persons on foot.

Personally, we preferred the top of a horse bus, when it was not too crowded. Otherwise the sight of two weary horses struggling and falling on slippery pavements with a heavy car, 14 people above and 15 below, is not edifying to look down upon.

Sometimes we took a bus from the Parc Montsouris, on the south, entirely across Paris to the Square Montholon on the north. From the latter place it is an easy walk to the church of the Sacred Heart of Montmartre—the great, white, Romanesque building that can be seen all over Paris. The buses go direct to the Pantheon, the tomb of Napoleon and St. Etienne du Mont, where French women who desire children go to pray for the intercession of St. Xavier, patron saint of Paris.

Many of the buses also take one to the outskirts of Paris—to Ivry, Clichy and other suburbs, where the people live simpler lives, and you may see old women gossiping on street corners, groups of men discussing local politics, rosy cheeked children at play in the gutters with faces far different from those of the typical Paris gamin.

MARKETING IN PARIS

THE OLD RUE DE ST. JACQUES

THE BEST WAY TO SEE PARIS IS FROM THE TOP OF AN OMNIBUS

We were so fortunate as to be in Paris at the time of Mardi Gras and Mi-Careme. As Mardi Gras is supposedly the great day of the students and artistic folk, so Mi-Careme is especially the property of the market women, the wine, food and grain dealers. This is the gentle tradition, fostered for tradition's sake. As a matter of fact, the shrewd observer sets down with celebrations as a clever advertisement, designed to draw crowds of pleasure seeking tourists to Paris.

There is a pathetic side to these pleasure days in Paris—the thirst for the simplest amusement shown by the poor. Early on the morning of Mi-Careme women with heavy children in their arms were waiting patiently for the time when the floats should pass. They had been there for hours holding their places lest the wonderful sight escape them. When we came back, three hours later, they still stood or crouched on the curb, exhausted, soothing the crying children, still waiting for the procession—which never came, having served its function of amusing the Americans in the American section, and disbanded.

As we walked home from dinner, long after dark, we met some of these women dragging themselves disappointedly back to their dismal, winding streets, the children clinging to their skirts, too tired even to cry. A young California girl impulsively caught up one of these dejected little sightseekers, bore him into one of the gorgeous patisseries, and made him free of the shop.

"There, sweetheart," she cried. "You shall have some fun today, you poor little mite. Choose! Take whatever you like and I will pay."

The child stared around fearfully at the fat baker behind his mounds of tempting dainties, at his mother peering at him from the dusk without, at the circle of curious, kindly Americans. Then he stretched his arm and pointed.

"Bread," he whispered. "Give me bread!"

He staggered from the shop, his arms hardly meeting around the two great loaves that his mother snatched from him at the doorway, and we followed with lumps in our throats. We had caught a glimpse of what life beneath the surface means in Paris.

We had caught a glimpse of what life beneath the surface means in Paris.

There were many children, cats and dogs in our little street. They seemed ever to overflow into the boulevards beyond, and, on our return from each expedition, greeted us as wanderers from afar. Our landlord's chubby little boy would rush to meet us, followed by the white bulldog with rabbit ears, the handsome, curly shepherd of the milk dealer and the two fat, nondescript little dogs of the hay seller. Even the blind cat of the grain dealer would come picking his way across the flagged passage to purr a husky greeting. As I turned down the quiet street, with little fingers clinging to mine, it always seemed to me, although the way was narrow and the skies gloomy, a pleasant, even a beautiful street, and the word it spelled was home. It was with deeper regret than can well be realized that we left Paris, even though our way led across seas to that larger conception of home in one's own country. Once you have lived in Paris, become a part of its life, a tie is formed that can never be broken. Sooner or later you will return to live over the happy days of that first experience.