HER FIANCÉ: BY MARIE VAN SAANAN

ER name was Marie Soleil. She lived in a tiny room that
smelt of faded things. She had lived there neatly and
uncomplainingly for fifteen years. No one had ever
minded what became of her. She eked out a timid,
honest, and spiritless existence by fabricating paper
flowers. Indeed she looked like a wilted pink flower
that has lain too long without care. Yet loveless and
ungraceful, Marie Soleil guarded in a secret sanctuary of imagination,
wistful tendencies toward romance and adventure.

When she was loneliest, she would stand and stare out of the
narrow window which seemed to be merely basted in the slanting
roof of the old house. She stared over the crimson head of a peaked
geranium balanced on the window sill. She stared with dull small
eyes wondering at the decomposed stridences of the city. Fragments
of inconsequent sound mounted reiterating notes and themes, as if
instruments of a vast orchestra were tuning tirelessly, while waiting
signal for a concerted harmony which never came. In certain moods
of Paris, through blue haze, the houses grinning and blinking like
linked files of monsters in grotesque hats, with chimneys as plumes,
seemed poised for the figures of a quadrille. She thought they leered
and winked at her, inviting her to the dance. Often she shook her
head at them. But they were friendlier than the strangers who, with
averted faces, hurried over the cool slate-colored streets. She had
never solved the tricks of relationship, or gained by eloquent personal
appeal any human recognition of value. She counted nods and
casual words the sum due her of sociability.

Now while she made paper flowers for a living and stared out of
the window, nations intrigued, combined, and decided momentous
affairs. Then one day there was war. Whereupon preconceived
attitudes and complacencies, scattered like chaff in a cyclone, and
the people of many nations were thrust suddenly into conscious forms
of pain and violence. Men, leagued in armies, strove by destroying to
survive. Problems of families, homes, affairs of individuals vanished
beneath the trampling tramping obedient masses moved onward
with click of machinery by calculating governments. Voices raised in
unison, sang the anthem with large grave accents that drowned the
monotone of farewells. The air, the earth, the seas hung heavy with
death. The stations of cities, more significant than ever, hummed
with the vivid passage of soldiers, and women, who in final convulsive
gesture appeared to retain, while freeing.

Marie Soleil stopped making paper flowers, since she could no
longer sell them. With this brusque cessation of livelihood, she
joined dismayed throngs, entered the vortex of taxed responsibility,
and became a quickened nerve in a responsive population. Only no one had time to notice her readiness to play her part.

In vain she pinned a penny tricolored badge of France upon her shabby coat, and mingled wistfully with febrile crowds. In vain she circled discursive groups, listening to loud opinions, nodding approval, or sighing in gentle echo of public sentiment. Since she had sent no man away to die, her weeping could only water other graves and there were already enough tears for those.

Wherever she went, through the tiny street which had known her for fifteen years, in the expectant city among the hushed black-browed women who clung together sharing fears and pride, she could only touch the rim of their anguish. And when she ventured to intrude upon their banded talk with halting phrase of comfort, they would first turn eagerly to her, question her authority, then shake their heads and murmur: “It is easy to talk, Mademoiselle... but it is never the same when you have no one out there...”

Sometimes they eyed her askance, as a curiosity seeker. Kindlier women unfolded to her breathless attention tales of danger and heroism, read her scraps of letters from absent sons, husbands and sweethearts, gave to her the paler echo of their stoic resignation. Still others questioned her with that fine cruelty of advantage, assuming condescending manners when they discovered her lack of claim. They grudged her spirit any credit of loyalty.

The concierge, a stout voluble guardian of the old house, assembled daily a round of cronies in her gloomy den at the foot of the stairs. The place smelt of chicory and lard, and shadows lay stuffily over her Norman bed, red-covered table, and kitchen chairs. But on the mantelpiece in antiquated frames stood a male generation of her family, all in uniform. She had a brother in the trenches, a nephew had already been wounded. Now to the clack of tongues the concierge directed importantly the confection of socks and scarfs for “our ones.”

Marie Soleil envied these women their knitting. She knew that in all the city women were bending over needles and wool. But she had not money enough to buy wool, or indeed anyone to knit for. Everywhere she applied for work they explained to her in set phrase that they had no need of extra good will, or that she would have to supply her own materials, or that they only accepted members of such and such a society. So she would steal back to her little room, rebuffed and ashamed of her enforced inactivity, and wonder more than ever why, in the pulsing tragic events of the day, she had no place.

She grew thinner and more subdued. Her savings came to a frail
showing. Winter threatened. The acrid fragrance of chrysanthemums edged the frosting air. Women knitted harder than ever for the soldiers in the trenches, who with numbed fingers were pulling and pulling at triggers set to kill.

Marie Soleil, driven with the rest into an inclement season, tried not to think of herself.

"They are colder than I could ever be."

She was too proud to ask for help. Besides first consideration was due to the women whose men were fighting. She could not conceive of armies, battles and ravaged lands, nor hear the echo of cannons. But she paused and shivered at evoked horrors, when rolling on their mute closed way through racket of traffic went long grey lines of ambulances. Their trim clean mystery, their neat red emblems covered so smoothly what lay within. Marie Soleil’s heart ached with the need to make these sad men whole again. She loved the bandaged convalescents, who in faded uniforms passed consciously with glistening grateful eyes, glad above all to be still alive. They never noticed her. But to her each was a hero, the savior of her country. She worshipped them as a young girl, choosing shyly the perfect man, thrones him high above all other men.

Sometimes her concierge talked to her and gave her news of the brother and nephew, adding with a wise nod:

"You are fortunate to have no one, Mademoiselle. It is different . . . ." which seemed to Marie Soleil a covert reproach.

Then came the day of the Dead. The people of the city streamed in thick quiet masses to the cemeteries. They went, united in cult of souvenir, to visit and flower their dead. It was a day of flowers. The tang of wilting chrysanthemums, musty whiffs of fading violets, the persuasive fragrance of tributes stirred through the cold grey day. Armies of flowers walked vividly to chosen graves and knelt refreshingly. Assembled families went soberly to cluster around some shrine. The restless spirit of battlefields seemed bidden to the stone houses of the dead. Beside the carved labeling slabs of monuments and crosses, floated intangibly the nameless souls of soldiers, who had travelled far, bidding for permanent hospitality. It was as if, collected in grave unity, the mourned military dead of France had given tryst.

Marie Soleil felt disgraced because she had no one to weep for on such a day. However she put on her rusty black cape that hung in meager folds, her jaded straw hat with a feather neatly circling a low brim, and pinning the tricolored badge in bright view crept forth to join the crowds. Lost, unheeded in the black streams that welled devoutly through the city, she wandered eying each draped woman
wistfully. It was a solemn claim to respectability—to own a grave.

At the gates of Père La Chaise, wedged in the onward crush, caught in an embroidered napery of masses that seemed to merge into some livid face expressing suitable expectancy, she drifted toward the graves. Because the drift of strangers was flecked with rich-toned blooms, she bought a two sou bunch of violets. They gave her confidence, attached her to the day. She held them consciously, inviting the fleet compassion of a look or gesture in the throng. She was glad that she was dressed in black. No idea of deception troubled her naïve longing to be kin with those she mourned. A gentle readiness to follow them allayed her usual timidity.

She wandered through the gate, past lined scrutinizing guardians up the sloping alley.

A dust-stained soldier, a sallow widow, a prattling child elbowed her. An elderly man herding a breed of sons stalked by with measured steps. He carried a beaded wreath. A slender faded-lipped woman stared vaguely at Marie Soleil.

Marie Soleil climbed the hill alone, pretending to hunt her path. The passersby seemed to have relapsed into a normal sociable atmosphere, as if once in this city, the mask of circumstance might relax without offending their dead. Besides, it was Sunday, their usual day of rest. A sideway beckoned to her, and she followed its secret shadows. A great longing pervaded her soul. She pretended that someone who had cared for her—a soldier perhaps—lay tranquilly awaiting her visit. She dreamed that, in all this tangled world of living and dead, some right of love and memory belonged to her. This garden seemed an elysian field wherein rested weary ones. And she was weary! So weary with the burden of her insignificance, that she faltered and stumbled against a grave. It was a freshly moulded grave, hidden at the foot of a dried bush. A homely cross sentinelled its ungarlanded mound. Upon the cross was written: “Jean Béret, Soldier,—killed at Charleroi,”—the date, and that was all.

Marie Soleil stared down, sweet pity warming her. She thought of the soldiers she had seen. They had meant to her the army of France. Jean Béret had been one of Them. She thought of the grey ambulances rolling down the vivid brilliant streets. She closed her eyes suddenly and sank upon her knees, laying reverently the two sou bunch of violets upon the unflowered earthy surface. The violets softened a relentless line.

In kneeling she took possession of the grave. Perhaps Jean Béret,
forgotten, laid away, had known that she would find him. He must have been a brave honest faced little soldier in a bright uniform. Once, long ago, in a far away village, she had seen such a young man and he had smiled at her. Jean Béret smiled so now, and, smiling, mysteriously took her by the hand. Why should he not belong to her!

The chill of sunset numbed her feet and painted her lips the color of the mauve clouds that fleeted above bronze foliage. She knelt in a young ecstasy of dreams, telling herself a beautiful story. She had known Jean Béret in a village. He had loved her, and they had walked together through spicy fields, she leaning on his arm. Then she had gone away, and he had waited for her to come back,—until the war. He marched away with the others. Now he was dead and she had found him.

Beyond, somewhere in a red world, she heard the shuffle of home-going feet. The Day of the Dead slid into twilight. Long shadows, ghosts of arms, waving, bade visitors farewell.

Marie Soleil stumbled to her feet and went with the rest, carrying securely, enfolded in a new, a reverent radiance, her illusion, telling herself over and over again the story of Jean Béret’s love.

The concierge standing in the doorway of the house, nodded in a condescending way.

“You went to the cemetery, Mademoiselle?”

Then Marie Soleil said: “I went to visit the grave of my fiancé. He was killed at Charleroi.”

“Your fiancé!” cried the concierge, hastening after Marie Soleil and detaining her. “I never knew . . . .”

Marie answered quietly: “Why should you know?”

The concierge bobbed up and down with undisguised curiosity. “Well, well, you surprise me nevertheless. So the poor boy is dead. You should have told me.”

“Killed at Charleroi,” repeated Marie Soleil as if it were a lesson. “To think of it,” fussed the concierge. “My poor little one! Ah, it is only those who lose a man who know what it is.”

“He was brave,” chanted Marie Soleil. “They decorated him on the field of battle. He would surely have been an officer.”

“Like my brother’s boy,” eagerly echoed the concierge. “There was a fine fellow for you. Would you believe it, Mademoiselle, he too is gone.” She started sniffing; “these are bad days. How will they end?”

Now the concierge told her friends,—told the little shopkeepers in the street, told the ancient tenants of the old house, and even the postman about Marie Soleil’s fiancé, and every time the story was told,
the fiancé became braver, more beautiful. There were many who envied Marie Soleil. Some said that she was sly, others that she could not have been a good girl, while others watched her pass with murmured sympathy and kindness. Her little rusty black figure no longer slipped by unperceived. In the street, she was placed foremost romantically among those who mourned, comparing grief.

But unheeding them, she lived with her illusion become reality. She was hungry, but that did not matter. Surely Jean Béret has suffered greater hunger than she. She was shabby, nor did that matter. For surely Jean Béret’s bright uniform had grown bedraggled and torn on that last battlefield. She heard as echoes, the distant guns, the hollow noise of cannons, the roar of contending masses. And all the armies wore one face—the face of Jean Béret.

Each soldier met along the highways, seemed Jean Béret’s brother going out to avenge his dead, her dead. There were no strangers to whom she could not speak of him.

Twice a week she went to Père La Chaise and knelt beside his abiding place.

“I am glad that you are here to stay,” she whispered. “At least you are not lying out there unclaimed.”

Her face grew withered with cold. Her cape flapped like a moulting black wing, in the sharp winds. Her shoes were torn with climbing the hill. But she was happy.

“You look tired, Mademoiselle,” the concierge often said. “Why do you not join me and my friends and sit with us and knit? I will make you tea”; for the concierge had adopted a motherly attitude toward Marie Soleil.

“I am not tired... never tired.”

The day came though, when she could not afford to buy a two sou bunch of violets. But there were scraps of colored paper left, remnants of her work in other days. So sitting beside the narrow window, perched high under the slanting roof, she twisted the paper into beautiful flowers. She made two red roses and a golden chrysanthemum.

She hoped it would not rain the day she took them to Jean Béret. The afternoon was crisp and blue, such a looking blue of sky and stone as froze the city to the sky, and gave the great bells a cracked clang.

She hurried through the gates of Père La Chaise. The roses glowed in her purpling hand. The houses of the dead seemed caught in a blue prism. The paths curved brown and sear. She nodded to a guardian who knew her.

As she drew near Jean Béret’s grave beneath the withered bush
she saw what looked like an inkspot, and took form only when she paused to catch her breath.

A stranger swathed in crape, with hidden face, stood staring down. She looked so tall in the blue light, that her long black veil seemed hooked and trailing from the topmost claw of a branch. Her heavy outline stamped against surrounding stone and earth hovered top-heavily over the quiet mound.

She never moved.

There was something about the motionless brooding pose of this stranger that terrified Marie Soleil. An unknown and fine pain pricked her heart, but she went forward, clasping the paper roses, and without another look to right or left knelt, passionately devout, placing the roses on the grave.

A hostile stillness froze her to the spot, as with bowed head she tried to summon Jean Béret to the rescue.

Suddenly a high voice intruded.

"I beg your pardon, Madame, but did you know my husband?" Marie Soleil stumbled to her feet, enfolding her meagre cape protectingly around her shoulders. "Your husband?" she repeated stupidly.

The stranger darted a haughty, suspicious glance. The red roses burnt upon the grave. She waved towards them. "I wanted to know whom to thank for these," she said.

Marie Soleil could not speak.

"I got here as soon as I could," said the woman, never taking her eyes from Marie Soleil. "Perhaps you were his nurse?"

Marie shook her head.

"But you knew him?" persisted the woman.

At last she answered, carefully handling her small voice.

"Long ago."

Jean Béret's wife stared suspiciously: "He never told me. . . ."

Marie Soleil, however, lifted her head: "Perhaps he forgot," she said.

"Well, I thank you for the flowers. Or would you like to take them back?"

Marie Soleil shook her head, then without looking again at the grave, desolately turned away.

The woman in crape stood like a sentinel, while Jean Béret's promised one crept down the hill alone.