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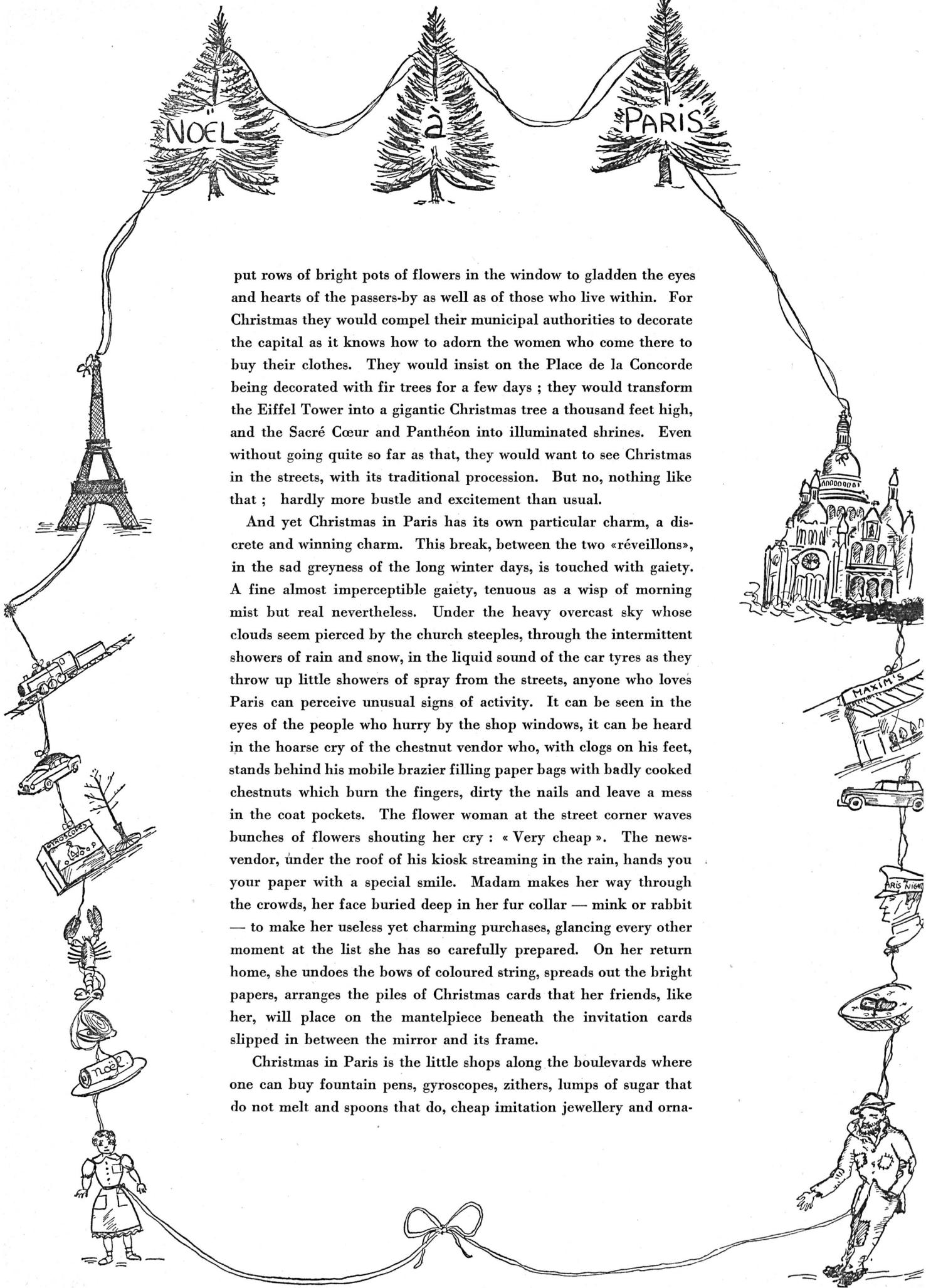
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Christmas in Paris

Christmas in Paris is quite different from Christmas anywhere else — which should not surprise you as Paris is known for her sense of originality. First of all, there is a paradox in the way Paris appears during the holiday season to her visitors and her inhabitants. Everywhere abroad, at Christmas time, towns get all spruced up, decorate themselves a little, line the streets with Christmas trees joined by strings of coloured lights and bright signs, hang up lanterns, turn on the floodlighting and put flowers in the windows. Hardly any of this is to be found in Paris. There are, of course, a few half-hearted attempts in the Place Vendôme or the Avenue Matignon ; Christian Dior and Jean Dessès place small Christmas trees at the entrances to their houses ; the big stores decorate their windows ; here and there, an isolated individual breaks the monotony of the façades with an amusing little arrangement of his own ; but these are the exceptions rather than the rule. In reality, Paris, which has the reputation of being the best dressed town, does not get dressed up for Christmas. And its inhabitants are just as remiss in this respect as the municipal authorities. It is a pity. Especially when one remembers the appearance of the smallest streets in Switzerland, England, Germany, Holland or Denmark, rows of attractive little houses with flowers and decorations at every window. At this point, one begins to wonder whether the French really do care for flowers. To hear the publicity put out by the rival French nurseries and horticulturists over the air from Radio Luxembourg or Monte Carlo, to see the products that some of these firms exhibit every five years at the « Floralies de Gand » — which are by the way the most extraordinary sight imaginable — one would believe that flowers are almost a cult in France. But how wrong one would be ! In the first place, if the French really cared for flowers they would oblige their architects to build them sash-windows so that they could

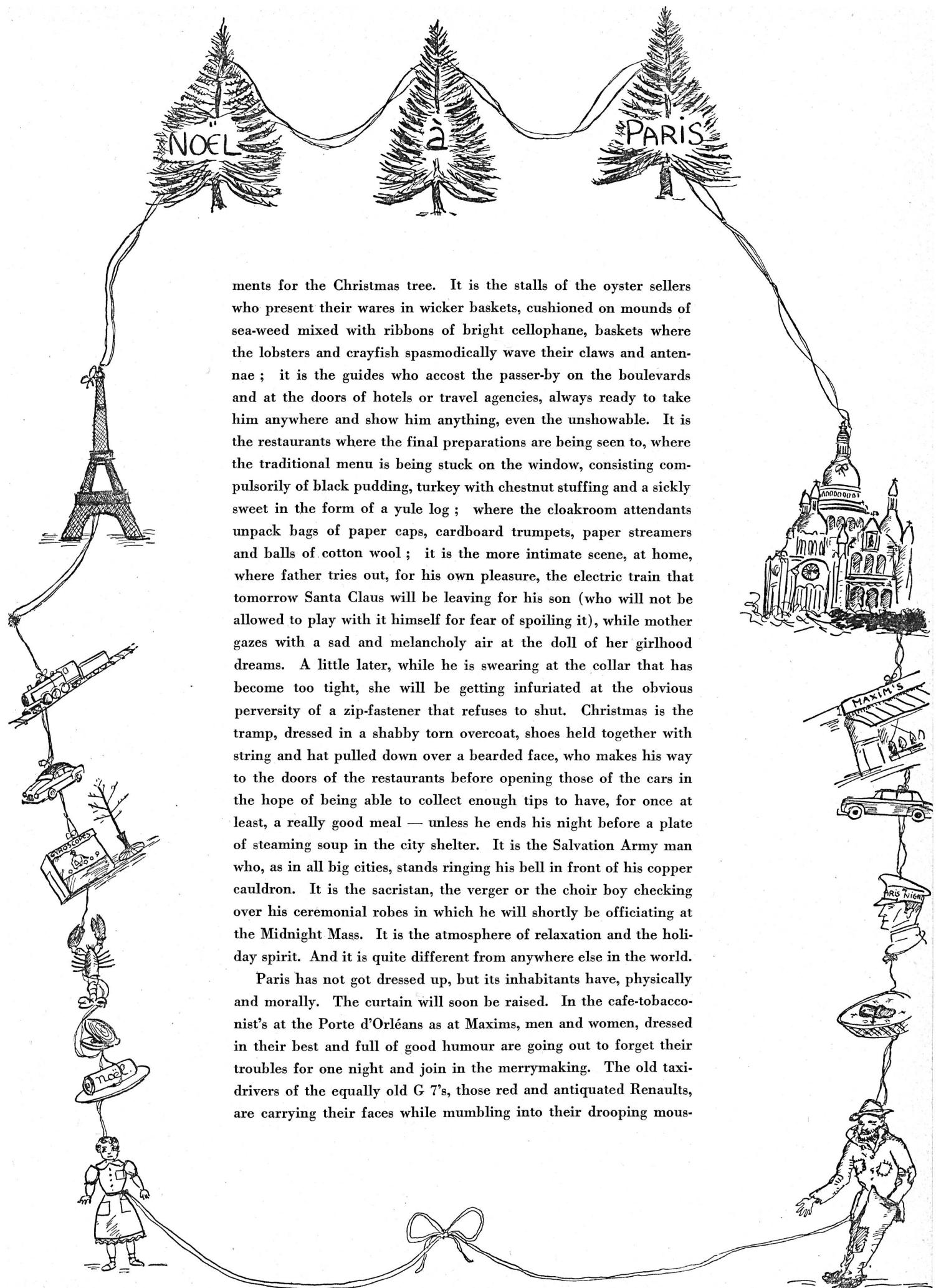




put rows of bright pots of flowers in the window to gladden the eyes and hearts of the passers-by as well as of those who live within. For Christmas they would compel their municipal authorities to decorate the capital as it knows how to adorn the women who come there to buy their clothes. They would insist on the Place de la Concorde being decorated with fir trees for a few days ; they would transform the Eiffel Tower into a gigantic Christmas tree a thousand feet high, and the Sacré Cœur and Panthéon into illuminated shrines. Even without going quite so far as that, they would want to see Christmas in the streets, with its traditional procession. But no, nothing like that ; hardly more bustle and excitement than usual.

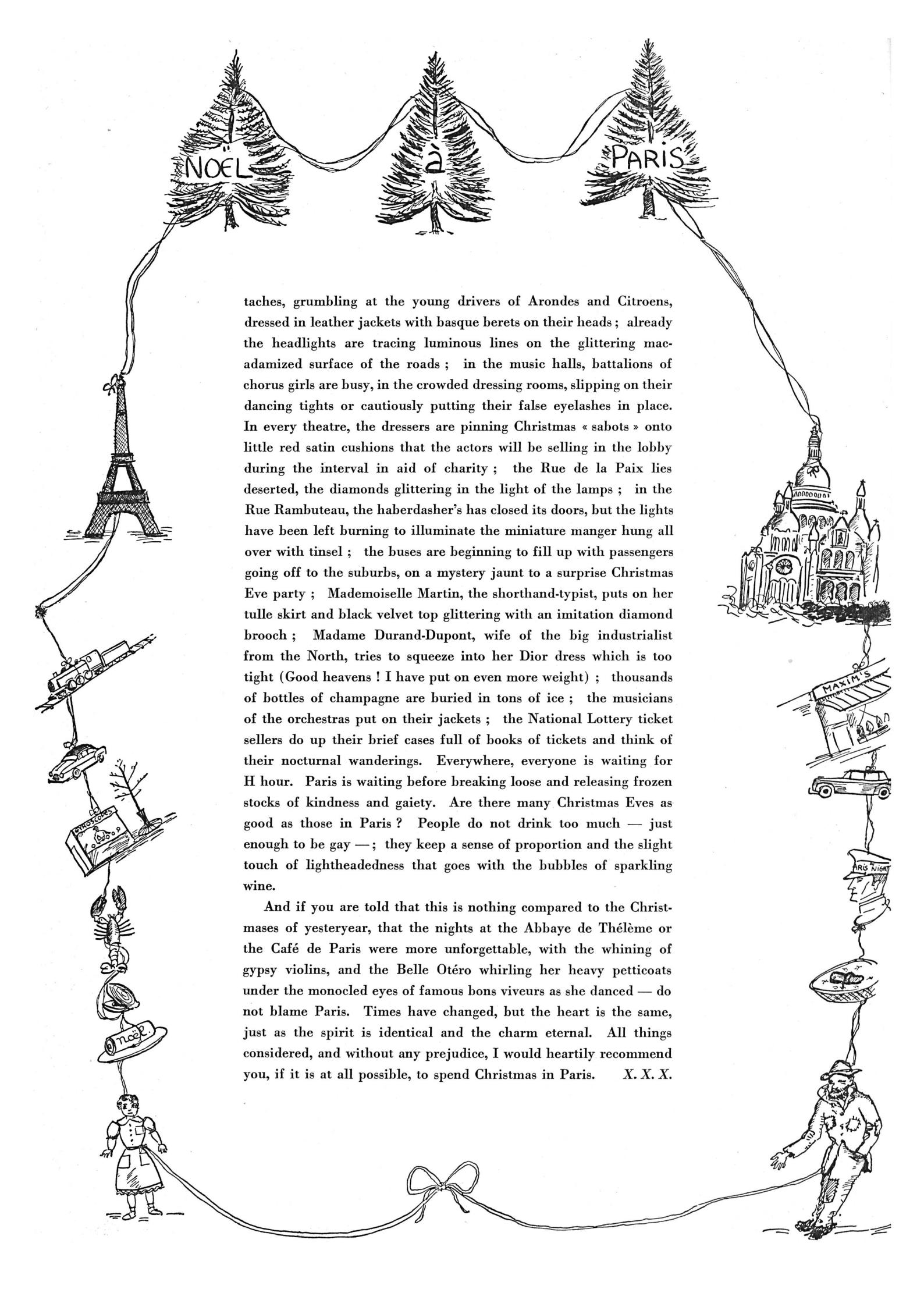
And yet Christmas in Paris has its own particular charm, a discrete and winning charm. This break, between the two «réveillons», in the sad greyness of the long winter days, is touched with gaiety. A fine almost imperceptible gaiety, tenuous as a wisp of morning mist but real nevertheless. Under the heavy overcast sky whose clouds seem pierced by the church steeples, through the intermittent showers of rain and snow, in the liquid sound of the car tyres as they throw up little showers of spray from the streets, anyone who loves Paris can perceive unusual signs of activity. It can be seen in the eyes of the people who hurry by the shop windows, it can be heard in the hoarse cry of the chestnut vendor who, with clogs on his feet, stands behind his mobile brazier filling paper bags with badly cooked chestnuts which burn the fingers, dirty the nails and leave a mess in the coat pockets. The flower woman at the street corner waves bunches of flowers shouting her cry : « Very cheap ». The news-vendor, under the roof of his kiosk streaming in the rain, hands you your paper with a special smile. Madam makes her way through the crowds, her face buried deep in her fur collar — mink or rabbit — to make her useless yet charming purchases, glancing every other moment at the list she has so carefully prepared. On her return home, she undoes the bows of coloured string, spreads out the bright papers, arranges the piles of Christmas cards that her friends, like her, will place on the mantelpiece beneath the invitation cards slipped in between the mirror and its frame.

Christmas in Paris is the little shops along the boulevards where one can buy fountain pens, gyroscopes, zithers, lumps of sugar that do not melt and spoons that do, cheap imitation jewellery and orna-



ments for the Christmas tree. It is the stalls of the oyster sellers who present their wares in wicker baskets, cushioned on mounds of sea-weed mixed with ribbons of bright cellophane, baskets where the lobsters and crayfish spasmodically wave their claws and antennae ; it is the guides who accost the passer-by on the boulevards and at the doors of hotels or travel agencies, always ready to take him anywhere and show him anything, even the unshowable. It is the restaurants where the final preparations are being seen to, where the traditional menu is being stuck on the window, consisting compulsorily of black pudding, turkey with chestnut stuffing and a sickly sweet in the form of a yule log ; where the cloakroom attendants unpack bags of paper caps, cardboard trumpets, paper streamers and balls of cotton wool ; it is the more intimate scene, at home, where father tries out, for his own pleasure, the electric train that tomorrow Santa Claus will be leaving for his son (who will not be allowed to play with it himself for fear of spoiling it), while mother gazes with a sad and melancholy air at the doll of her girlhood dreams. A little later, while he is swearing at the collar that has become too tight, she will be getting infuriated at the obvious perversity of a zip-fastener that refuses to shut. Christmas is the tramp, dressed in a shabby torn overcoat, shoes held together with string and hat pulled down over a bearded face, who makes his way to the doors of the restaurants before opening those of the cars in the hope of being able to collect enough tips to have, for once at least, a really good meal — unless he ends his night before a plate of steaming soup in the city shelter. It is the Salvation Army man who, as in all big cities, stands ringing his bell in front of his copper cauldron. It is the sacristan, the verger or the choir boy checking over his ceremonial robes in which he will shortly be officiating at the Midnight Mass. It is the atmosphere of relaxation and the holiday spirit. And it is quite different from anywhere else in the world.

Paris has not got dressed up, but its inhabitants have, physically and morally. The curtain will soon be raised. In the cafe-tobacconist's at the Porte d'Orléans as at Maxim's, men and women, dressed in their best and full of good humour are going out to forget their troubles for one night and join in the merrymaking. The old taxi-drivers of the equally old G 7's, those red and antiquated Renaults, are carrying their faces while mumbling into their drooping mous-



taches, grumbling at the young drivers of Arondes and Citroens, dressed in leather jackets with basque berets on their heads ; already the headlights are tracing luminous lines on the glittering macadamized surface of the roads ; in the music halls, battalions of chorus girls are busy, in the crowded dressing rooms, slipping on their dancing tights or cautiously putting their false eyelashes in place. In every theatre, the dressers are pinning Christmas « sabots » onto little red satin cushions that the actors will be selling in the lobby during the interval in aid of charity ; the Rue de la Paix lies deserted, the diamonds glittering in the light of the lamps ; in the Rue Rambuteau, the haberdasher's has closed its doors, but the lights have been left burning to illuminate the miniature manger hung all over with tinsel ; the buses are beginning to fill up with passengers going off to the suburbs, on a mystery jaunt to a surprise Christmas Eve party ; Mademoiselle Martin, the shorthand-typist, puts on her tulle skirt and black velvet top glittering with an imitation diamond brooch ; Madame Durand-Dupont, wife of the big industrialist from the North, tries to squeeze into her Dior dress which is too tight (Good heavens ! I have put on even more weight) ; thousands of bottles of champagne are buried in tons of ice ; the musicians of the orchestras put on their jackets ; the National Lottery ticket sellers do up their brief cases full of books of tickets and think of their nocturnal wanderings. Everywhere, everyone is waiting for H hour. Paris is waiting before breaking loose and releasing frozen stocks of kindness and gaiety. Are there many Christmas Eves as good as those in Paris ? People do not drink too much — just enough to be gay — ; they keep a sense of proportion and the slight touch of lightheadedness that goes with the bubbles of sparkling wine.

And if you are told that this is nothing compared to the Christmases of yesteryear, that the nights at the Abbaye de Thélème or the Café de Paris were more unforgettable, with the whining of gypsy violins, and the Belle Otéro whirling her heavy petticoats under the monocled eyes of famous bons viveurs as she danced — do not blame Paris. Times have changed, but the heart is the same, just as the spirit is identical and the charm eternal. All things considered, and without any prejudice, I would heartily recommend you, if it is at all possible, to spend Christmas in Paris. X. X. X.