



WHAT WE FOUND WHEN WE WENT SHOPPING FOR LINGERIE By Duncan Christy

# PARIS *Under*world

Cities will send you messages about what their inhabitants consider essential for living. You will notice this particularly in the shop fronts and how frequently you see a certain type in a given city. That's why in Paris there are so many stores selling books, so many stores selling wine, so many stores selling soap.

And so many stores selling lingerie.

To research this adequately it is best to go to one of Paris' great department stores, such as Le Bon Marché, Printemps or Galeries Lafayette. There the amount of real estate devoted to the appreciation and acquisition of lingerie is remarkable, even vast. Row after row, shelf after shelf, mannequin after mannequin. Frill after frill, appliqué after appliqué, lacy detail after lacy detail.

What is most remarkable, though, is not just the abundance of some of the world's most beautiful lingerie but who's shopping for it. There are of course young women. Then there are young women with their apparent boyfriends or husbands. There are young women with their apparent mothers and aunts, sharing this intimacy. There are "women of a certain age" (a French idiom which has found its way into English), who are examining lingerie with the scrutiny usually reserved for holy texts. There are women even older than women of a certain age, examining lingerie with the same intensity. There are older couples together, deliberating over lingerie as they would over an important financial investment. There are grandfatherly men, wearing grins that Maurice Chevalier (of *Gigi* fame) would have envied as they pay for their purchases.

Department stores are the best places for this orientation, because one can simply mingle and browse and observe. Once one is back on the street, the ubiquity of the far smaller lingerie shops in Paris will suddenly make much more sense.—*Duncan Christy*

ILLUSTRATION BY NERYL WALKER

