



# EMPIRE OF

BY TED GUP

**J**UST BENEATH PARIS, THE CITY OF Light and *joie de vivre*, lies another city, dark, dead and seemingly as vast as Hades itself. Here, under the 14th Arrondissement, may be found the remains of six million Parisians. "Arrête! C'est ici l'empire de la mort," warns the inscription above the lintel. "Halt! Here is the empire of the dead."

It would be hard to imagine a more

unlikely tourist destination. But on this day, as on most, a long line of the curious and the morbid—French people, Germans, Italians, Americans, Britons, Spaniards, Japanese—snakes its way around a bustling corner on the Left Bank at Place Denfert-Rochereau. They wait to pay 33 francs (\$5) each for a ticket to the underworld and an unsparing vision of mortality. Some 200,000 a year



THE DEAD





In this c. 1550 engraving of the Cemetery of the Innocents in Paris, a sheet-wrapped corpse, right, is lowered into a common grave. Eventually, exhumed bones stored in the charnel house, left, would be transferred to catacombs beneath the growing city.

come to explore the infernal reaches that stretch out here over an area equal in size to six or seven city blocks.

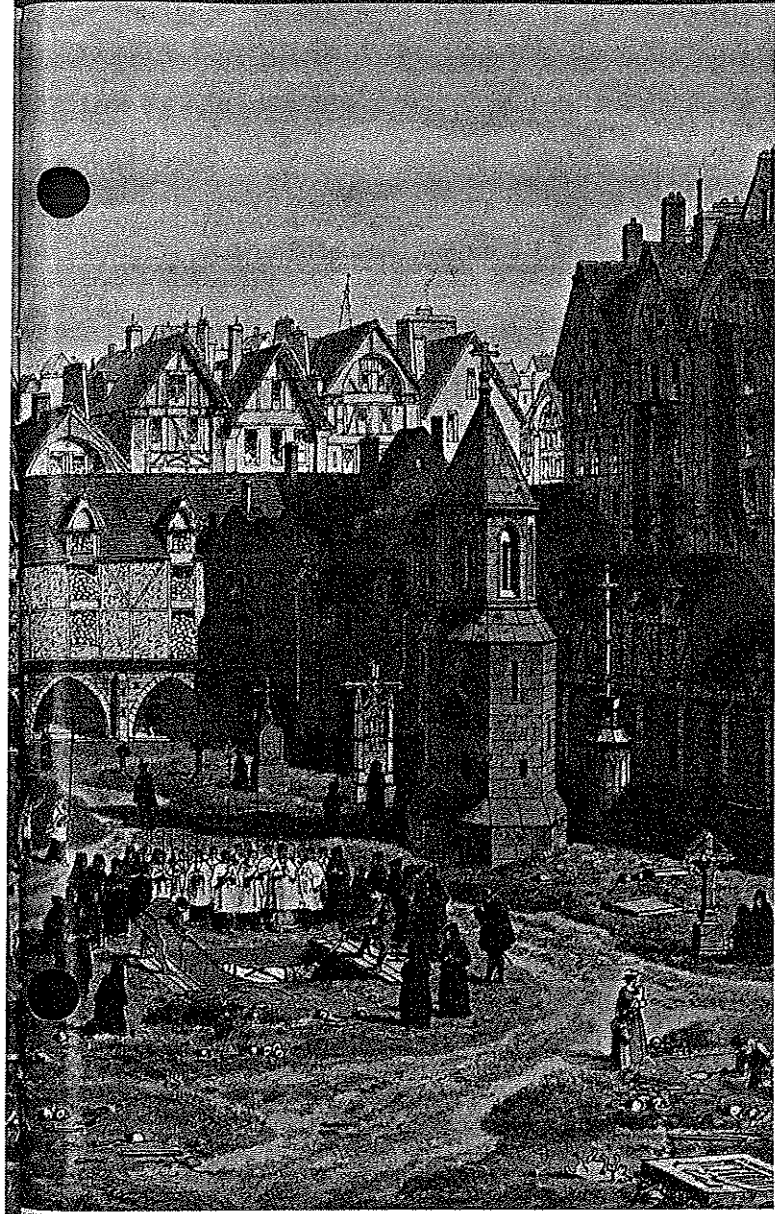
There is no guide and only the sparest of text chiseled in stone. A spiral stairway screws its way down the limestone bedrock, dropping 130 steps into a chill half-light. It has the feel of a bunker, except that those it protects have long since shed all vulnerabilities.

Minutes earlier, Adam Smith, a first-year law student at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., had been enjoying the midday sun as motor scooters, Citroëns and ambulances sped past café awnings advertising pizzas and *glaces*. Now, he stands at the end of a long dark corridor leading to the dead. White obelisks painted upon a black background date to the time of Napoleon. Before him, on either side of a narrow passageway, rises a solid wall of human remains—femurs, tibias and skulls—stacked neatly like cords of firewood, six feet high and stretching interminably into the darkness. Behind the orderly walls is a

chaotic mass of decayed and undifferentiated human rubble consisting of fragments and shards, broken skulls and pelvises. Here lies what little is left of victims of the plague, the guillotine and the French Revolution.

Adam Smith cannot resist lifting up a skull that looks out from the bony rampart and posing for a picture. When he puts his prop down upon a mound of other skulls, it produces a hollow sound not unlike that of an empty coconut shell. "I'm sorry," he says, and then, with a shudder, he wipes his fingers on his pants, leaving a luminescent trail of residue.

He takes in all that is around him. Where the few scattered lights cast their beams, green fungus may be seen blooming on the bones. Overhead, drops of cold water bead and drip upon the gawkers. It is as if the limestone ceiling and the walls themselves were weeping. A line of black paint extends the length of the catacombs' ceiling, tracing the way from entrance to exit, a remnant of the



This ossuary may seem a site of disregard and desecration, but it was never intended as such. In the Paris of centuries past, the living and the dead had long existed in close proximity. During the smallpox epidemic of 1418, some 50,000 corpses had to be disposed of within one six-week period.

Back then, those who were not nobility had little expectation of a plot eternal. The dead of 20 parishes were brought to the Cemetery of the Innocents, a common burial site near a central marketplace, and wrapped in sheets and placed indecorously in the ground. But it was not to be their final resting place. The soil of the Cemetery of the Innocents was said to be *mange-chair*, or "flesh-eating." Within a matter of weeks, flesh began to fall off the bones. Soon after, the remains were exhumed to make way for still more bodies.

**T**HE BONES WERE THEN CARTED OFF TO A CHARNEL house adjacent to the cemetery courtyard. It was little more than an endless bin of exposed bones. Not far off were stalls of vegetables and fruit stands. Merchants, street performers and prostitutes all went about their business, oblivious to the grim scene nearby.

But as the city grew, so too did the graveyard. Bodies were stacked upon bodies, sometimes more than 30 feet deep. Fear of pestilence grew. A name was given to the rank odor that hung above the cemetery—*méphitisme* (meaning, roughly, the smell of death). It was believed to cause milk to curdle and wine to turn to vinegar.

On May 30, 1780, a common grave cracked open, spilling its ghastly contents into the cellars of adjacent homes along Rue de Lingerie. It was reported that the collapse, accompanied by the appearance of dozens of decomposing corpses, released a kind of toxic gas. On November 9, 1785, King Louis XVI called for all remains to be transferred from the Cemetery of the Innocents to another location. That choice fell to the Inspector of the Quarries. The site selected consisted of several limestone quarries beneath the Montsouris Plain, just south of the center of Paris. On April 7, 1786, three priests consecrated the site that construction workers had prepared and reinforced as an underground ossuary. The actual transfer of bodies occurred at night or at dusk. Convoys of horse-drawn carts ferried the dead, covered by black veils, in a torchlight procession through the streets of Paris.

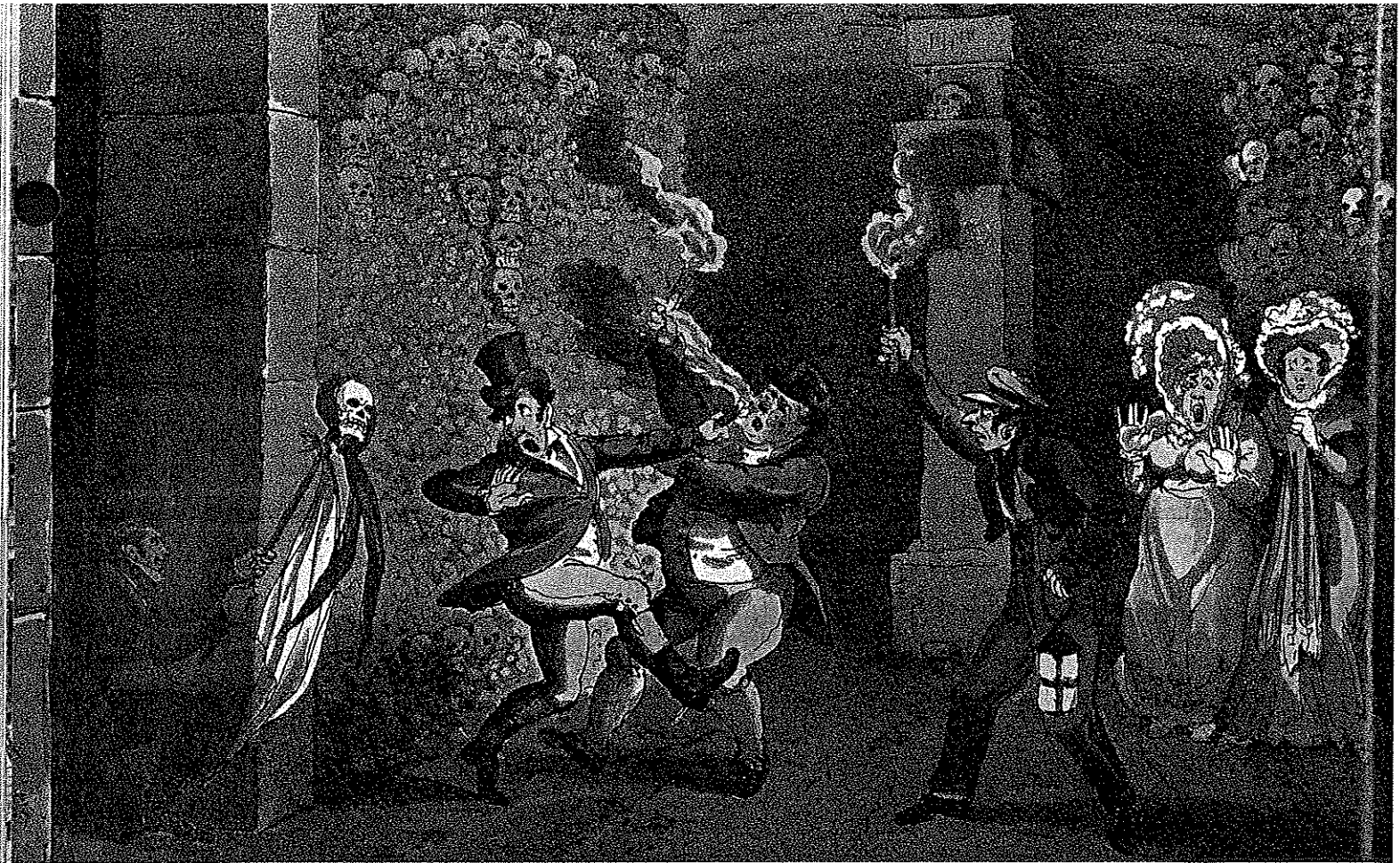
The remains were dropped through a well-like opening into the catacombs below. Night after night the grim task repeated itself, dragging on from the spring of 1786 until the beginning of 1788. In the years that followed, remains from other cemeteries were brought here, too. In 1859, as Paris underwent a fundamental transformation under

days when visitors relied upon candles and when the uninitiated could easily get lost.

Today, the presence of so many visitors has increased the humidity and accelerated decay. Underfoot, gravel brought in to help absorb the moisture crunches with every step. A few skulls gleam bright as pearls, polished by generations of passersby. Staring from the eye socket of one is a shiny ten-centime coin.

For most visitors, the impact of the catacombs is unsettling, to say the least. "Frightening," mutters 12-year-old Ania Schafft, a visitor from Heidelberg, Germany. "I hope I can sleep tonight." Karen Hart, a 19-year-old religion major at Dartmouth College, is also taken aback. "I can't comprehend that many people," she says. "They are so anonymous. We die and who's going to remember us?" It is a question many here ask. The remains present themselves as if they were part of some vast coral reef, a slow accretion of minerals in a tideless sea of time.





A prankster startles British tourists viewing the catacombs in a scene by the 19th-century caricaturist George Cruikshank.

Napoleon III, and the prefect Georges-Eugène Haussmann built the city's famed broad avenues, still more burial grounds were uncovered. From 1842 to 1860, more than 800 cartloads of human bones were deposited in the catacombs. In each instance, all individual identities were lost, but the origins—the names of the cemeteries and dates of transfer—were preserved. To this day, they are recorded on stone tablets placed before the remains, which came from leper colonies, convents and hospitals around the city.

**M**ANY FRENCH LUMINARIES ARE DOUBTLESS ENTOMBED here. Among those most often cited are the satirist François Rabelais, the philosophers Montesquieu and Pascal, the scientist Lavoisier, the poet and writer La Fontaine, the instigator of the Reign of Terror, Robespierre, his rival who perished at the guillotine, Danton, the writer Madame de Sévigné, Madame de Pompadour, mistress to Louis XV, and even the mother of Mozart. It is probable that all of them found a common grave in the catacombs.

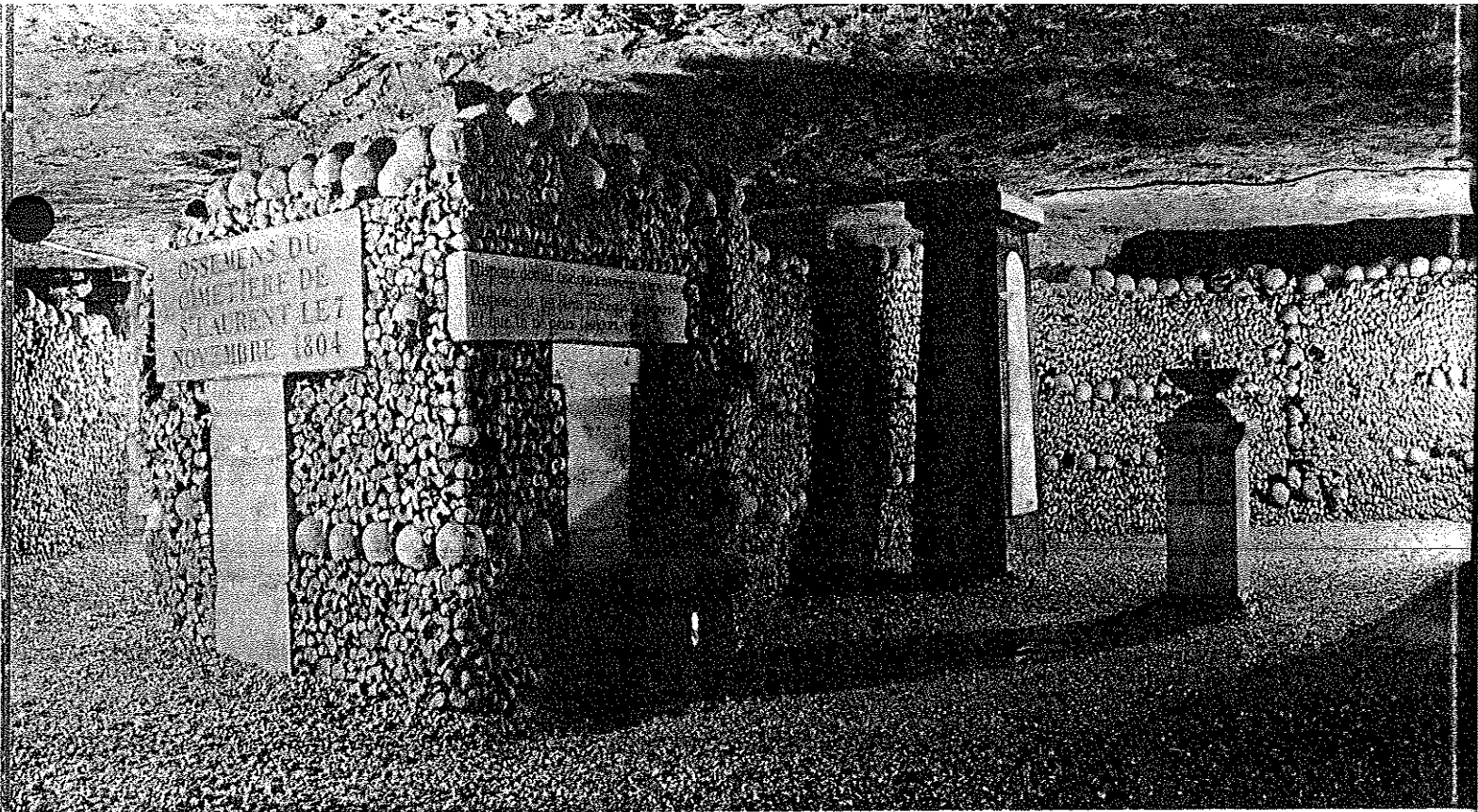
The mystique of these catacombs is not tied merely to the dead but to the living who have taken refuge here in periods of turmoil. During the time of the Paris Commune in 1871, workers rebelling against the government sought haven here. After the government recaptured Paris, soldiers hunted the insurrectionists down by torchlight, sealed off their escape routes and massacred them. During

the latter days of World War II, the French Resistance was headquartered in this same subterranean redoubt, among these walls of skulls.

Presiding over the empire of death these days is the catacomb's director, Jean-Pierre Willesme. He is a shy man, less like Charon, the grim ferrier of the dead, than a rumpled Inspector Clouseau. He treats all affairs of the catacombs as if they were state secrets, and seems to have little emotional attachment to the macabre world he oversees. "I am indifferent," he says, shrugging his shoulders. "I don't think I have any ancestors here. I look at it as a curator." He accepted the position, he said, because, well, no one else wanted it.

A thousand times he has walked through the catacombs, past the walls of skulls and femurs, and the stone tablets that speak of death in Greek, Latin and French. There are quotes from Racine, Homer, Virgil, Horace, Rousseau and Scripture. From the *Odyssey*: "It is not right to insult the dead." From Horace: "Believe that every day is your last." Willesme occasionally jests with his friends that he may one day be here among his faceless charges, but in truth he has no intention of joining them. Instead, he wishes to be buried with family in the countryside of Champagne.

Like Willesme, those who work here daily have come to take death in stride. "I'm a little less worried what I will become after death," says 27-year-old Philippe Lucien



Reinette, a guard. "I have in front of me what I will become. In a certain way, it's reassuring."

Grim though they may be, the catacombs have always held a special fascination for those with an artistic temperament. In 1861, the noted photographer Félix Nadar chronicled this underworld. In one photograph, a laborer is seen pulling a cart overflowing with skulls. In fact, the light was so poor that each exposure had to last for 20 minutes, and Nadar was forced to substitute mannequins for actual workers.

**T**HE CATACOMBS HAVE ALSO BEEN THE SITE OF CELEBRATED, even notorious, festivities. In the early hours of April 2, 1897, a secret concert was held here for more than a hundred scholars, artists, writers and assorted members of Parisian high society. Among the pieces performed by some 45 musicians were Chopin's "Funeral March," Beethoven's "Funeral March" and Saint-Saën's "Danse Macabre." When news of the underground soiree was made public, it was seen as scandalous and resulted in the firing of two catacombs workers who aided the concertgoers.

The 1897 concert was hardly the last celebration held among the dead. Each year, in the first week of December, on the day set aside to honor Sainte Barbe, patron saint of engineers and miners, nearly 200 students from the Ecole des Mines are given a key to the catacombs and allowed to throw a massive party. Here they may eat and drink and mill about among the legion of the dead, restricted only by the need to clean up afterward. This past year they were briefly summoned back to remove some bones they'd left behind—chicken bones.

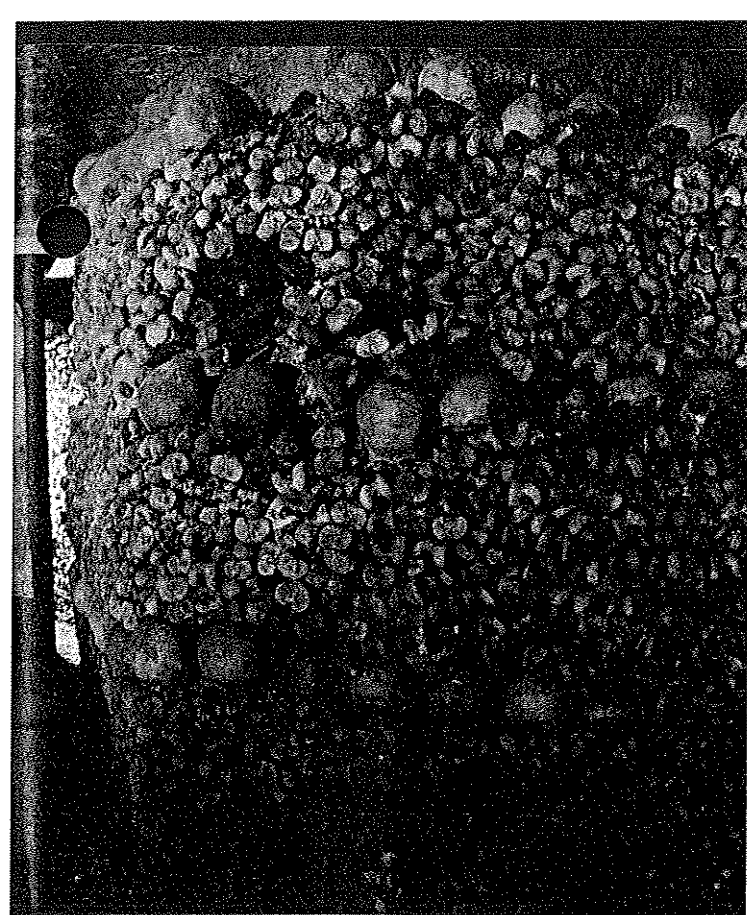
But the occasional festivities sanctioned by the city are

few compared with the many clandestine affairs conducted in Paris' other, officially off-limits ossuaries under cover of night. The young people who habitually frequent these catacombs on their own are known as "cataphiles." Some are so brazen as to feature their own Websites complete with photographs of their subterranean exploits, lists of unauthorized entry points and stories of outwitting the patrols from the office of the Inspector of the Quarries, under whose charge the catacombs remain.

Many cataphiles, far from being vandals, come with a pilgrim's sense of reverence. Among those who secretly visit the underworld are Sylvain Margaine, Pierre Jolivet and David Torcy. The three, all in their early 20s, are close friends, engineering students at the prestigious Ecole Centrale and members of a tiny group that calls itself "KTA-CLOP." The word has no meaning except for the prefix related to catacombs. It is one of innumerable such cliques that are routinely drawn to explore the catacombs, which they enter by manhole or tunnel. "It's the best dark you can find," says Margaine.

Often the three encounter other cataphiles, some of whom bring guitars, even drums. The underground galleries sometimes resound with reggae, heavy metal and French punk music. Some nights the intruders place candles on the skulls and engage in a kind of hide-and-go-seek, concealing secret messages, or conducting medieval war games beneath the streets of the capital. On the walls, they leave their insignias or elaborate paintings of skulls and other images.

On this night, Margaine, Jolivet and Torcy are well prepared. They carry bottles of tap water, butter cookies from Britain, nine pages of detailed maps of the catacombs in



is a picture of a memorial tablet to Philibert Aspait. The tablet is in a chamber long since closed off to the public. Beside the tablet is a white vase with pink plastic peonies, a kind of votive offering apparently left by a respectful cataphile. As midnight approaches, the trio ready themselves for another adventure. They are sent off with a cataphile's blessing: "Bonne descente."

**T**HOSE WHO TAKE THE ONE-MILE OFFICIAL TOUR OF the catacombs are usually relieved to come to the end. Before them rises a steep spiral stairway that leads to a small room where a lone skull with a tibia lodged between its jaws rests upon a table. Here visitors must submit to an inspection of their bags by two guards posted at the door. Two or three times a week, purloined skulls and femurs are discovered tucked deep into backpacks. No charges are brought as long as the bones are surrendered.

Even so, some thefts slip by. Not long ago, a priest returned two skulls found in a nearby church, apparently left by a repentant visitor. And a package from the United States, from a "Mademoiselle Vidal," arrived one day addressed to the catacombs. Inside was a letter of apology and a box of long leg bones. But what most visitors take away with them from the catacombs is something much more subtle—a newfound appreciation of sunlight.

There is a strange irony about the catacombs. The stones that were removed from the early quarries went to make the great buildings of Paris—the Louvre and Notre Dame. What was below the earth was raised into the light of day. But those who built and created the majesty of modern Paris—generations of architects, laborers, shopkeepers, soldiers and peasants—were destined to lose their individual identities, reduced to a kind of human landfill. They would occupy the same dark cavities from which the stones of Paris had been removed.

They and the stones had traded places. But though the names of those faceless millions have long since passed into oblivion, Parisians would argue that the work of their hands and hearts has not been forgotten. The city of Paris, City of Light, city of gourmands and lovers, of Notre Dame and the Louvre—this is their legacy and the grand monument that is their due. ✠

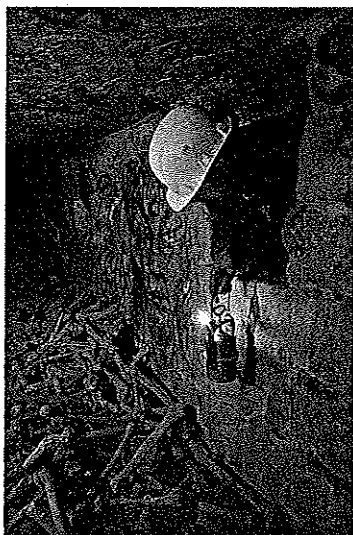
Ted Gup's *The Book of Honor* (Doubleday) is due out next month. He teaches journalism at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio.

protective plastic sleeves, flashlights and plenty of extra batteries. There are no lights where they are going, and they have learned the hard way that there is risk as well as exhilaration.

During an earlier expedition, they set out with two others, each of them carrying a flashlight. The batteries in all but one flashlight died, and they found themselves deep within the catacombs and quarries. The water sometimes rose up to their thighs, and the ceilings were so low that they occasionally had to crawl. They could only guess what would have happened if the batteries in that last light gave out.

Two centuries earlier, a Parisian named Philibert Aspait ventured alone into the catacombs, perhaps in search of wines believed to be stored there. A doorman at the Val-de-Grâce Hospital, he wore a leather belt to which were attached keys to the hospital. It is believed that at some point along the way his torch went out and he became disoriented and lost. Eleven years later, on April 30, 1804, workers discovered his remains in the catacombs, along with the hospital keys. A few days later, he was buried at the place where he was found—only a few yards from an exit.

Now, an hour before their descent into the catacombs below Montparnasse, the three young engineering students share photographs of their previous exploits. Among these



Unlike bones piled in an area off-limits to tourists (above), stacks displayed on the official catacombs tour (top) are tidy.