

L'ASSOMMOIR.

A FRENCH OF

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GERVAISE.

CHAPTER IV.

AMBITIOUS DREAMS.

The Boche couple, on the first of April, moved also, and took the loge of the great house, in la Rue de la Goutte d'Or. Things had turned out very nicely for Gervaise who, having always got on very comfortably with the Concierge in the house in Rue Neuve, dreaded lest she should fall into the power of some tyrant who would quarrel over every drop of water that was spilled. And a thousand other trifles like that. But with Madame Boche, all would go smoothly.

The day the lease was to be signed, and Gervaise stood in her new home, her heart swelled with joy. She was finally to live in that house, like a small town, with its intersecting corridors, instead of streets.

She felt a strange timidity—a dread of failure—when she found herself face to face with her enterprise. The struggle for bread was a terrible and an increasing one, and it seemed to her for a moment that she had been guilty of a wild, foolhardy act—like throwing herself into the jaws of a machine; for the planes in the cabinet-maker's shop and the hammers in the locksmith's were dimly grasped by her as a part of a great whole.

The water that ran past the door that day from the dyer's was pale green. She smiled as she stepped over it, accepting this color as a happy augury. She with her husband, entered the loge, where Madame Boche and the owner of the building, Monsieur Marescot, were talking business.

Gervaise, with a thrill of pain, heard Boche advise the landlord to turn out the dress-maker on the third floor, who was behind-hand with her rent. She wondered again at the attitude assumed by these Boche people, who did not seem to have ever seen her before. They had eyes and ears only for the landlord, who shook hands with his new tenants; but when they spoke of repairs, professed to be in such haste that morning, that it would be necessary to postpone the discussion. They reminded him of certain verbal promises he had made, and finally he consented to examine the premises.

The shop stood with its four bare walls and blackened ceiling. The tenant who had been there had taken away his own counters and cases. A furious discussion took place. Monsieur Marescot said it was for them to embellish the shop.

"That may be," said Gervaise gently; "but surely you cannot call putting on a fresh paper, instead of this that hangs in strips, an embellishment. Whitening the curbing, too, comes under the head of necessary repairs." She only required these two things.

Finally Marescot, with a desperate air, plunged his hands deep in his pockets, shrugged his shoulders, and gave his consent to the repairs on the ceiling, and to the paper, on condition that she would pay for half the paper—and then he hurried away.

When he had departed, Boche clapped Gervaise on the shoulder. "You may thank me for that!" he cried, and then went on to say that he was the real master of the house—that he settled the whole business of the establishment, and it was a nod and look from him that had influenced Monsieur Marescot. That evening, Gervaise, considering themselves in debt to Boche, sent him some wine.

In four days the shop should have been ready for them; but to inspect operations, Boche dropped the vest or pantaloons on which he was working, and gave the benefit of his advice, and the two men spent the whole day smoking and spitting, and arguing over each stroke of the brush. Some days the painters did not appear at all; on others they came and walked off in an hour's time, not to return again.

Poor Gervaise wrung her hands in despair. But finally, after two days of energetic labor, the whole thing was done, and the men walked off with their ladders, singing lustily.

Then came the moving, and finally Gervaise called herself settled in her new home, and was pleased as a child.

As she came up the street she could see her sign star off.

CLEAR STARCHER.

LACES AND EMBROIDERIES

DONE UP WITH ESPECIAL CARE.

The two first words were painted in large yellow letters on a pale blue ground.

In the recessed window, shut in at the back by muslin curtains, lay men's shirts, delicate handkerchiefs and cuffs—all these were on blue paper, and Gervaise was charmed. When she entered the door all was blue there; the paper presented a golden trellis and blue morning glories. In the center was a huge table draped with blue bordered cretonne, to hide the trestles.

Gervaise seated herself and looked round, happy in the cleanliness of all about her. Her first glance, however, was directed to her stove, a sort of furnace wherein ten irons could be heated at once. It was a source of constant anxiety lest her little apprentice should fill it too full of coal, and so injure it.

Behind the shop was her bed room and

with water all those portions that were not starched.

"This basket is for you, Madame Putois," she said; "and you will have to hurry, for they dry so fast in this weather."

Madame Putois was a thin little woman, who looked cool and comfortable in her tightly buttoned dress. She had taken her cap off, but stood at the table moving her irons to and fro with the regularity of an automaton. Suddenly she exclaimed:

"Put on your sacque, Clemence; there are three men looking in, and I don't like such things."

Clemence grumbled and growled. What did she care what she liked? She could not and would not roast to suit anybody.

"Clemence, put on your sacque," said Gervaise; "Madame Putois is right—it is not proper."

Clemence muttered, but obeyed, and consoled herself by giving the apprentice, who was ironing hose and towels by her side, a little push. Gervaise had a cap belonging to Madame Boche in her hand, and was ironing the crown with a round ball, when a tall bony woman came in. She was a laundress.

"You have come too soon, Madame Bijard!" cried Gervaise; "I said to-night. It is very inconvenient for me to attend to you at this hour." At the same time, however, Gervaise amiably laid down her work and went for the dirty clothes, which she piled up in the back shop. It took the two women nearly an hour to sort them and mark them with a stitch of colored cotton.

At this moment Goujet entered.

"By Jove!" he said; "the sun beats down on one's head like hammer." He caught at the table to sustain himself; he had been drinking—a spider's web had caught in his dark hair, where many a white thread was apparent. His under jaw dropped a little, and his smile was good-natured but silly.

Gervaise asked her husband if he had seen the Lorilleux, in rather a severe tone; when he said no, she smiled at him without a word of reproach.

"You had best go and lie down," she said pleasantly, "we are very busy and you are in our way. Did I say thirty-two handkerchiefs, Madame Bijard? Here are two more, that makes thirty-four."

But Goujet was not sleepy and he preferred to remain where he was Gervaise called Clemence and bade her to count the linen while she made out the list. She glanced at each piece as she wrote. She knew many of them by the color. That pillow-slip belonged to Madame Boche because it was stained with the pomade she always used, and so on through the whole. Gervaise was seated with these piles of soiled linen about her. Augustine, whose great delight was to fill up the stove had done so now, and it was red hot. Goujet leaned toward Gervaise.

"Kiss me," he said. "You are a good woman."

As he spoke he gave a sudden lurch and fell among the skirts.

"Do take care," said Gervaise impatiently, "you will git them all mixed again," and she gave him a little push with her foot whereat all the other women cried out.

"He is not like most men," said Madame Putois, "they generally wish to beat you when they come in like this."

Gervaise already regretted her impudent vexation and assisted her husband to his feet and then turned her cheek to him with a smile, but he put his arm round her and kissed her neck. She pushed him aside with a laugh.

"You ought to be ashamed!" she said, but yielded to his embrace, and the long kiss they exchanged before these people, amid the sickening odor of the soiled linen, and the alcoholic fumes of his breath, was the first downward step in the slow descent of their degradation.

Madame Bijard tied up the linen and staggered off under their weight while Gervaise turned back to finish her cap. Alas! the stove and the irons were alike red hot; she must wait a quarter of an hour before she could touch the irons and Gervaise covered the fire with a couple of shovelfuls of cinders. She then hung a sheet before the window to keep out the sun. Goujet took a place in the corner, refusing to budge an inch, and his wife and all her assistants went to work on each side of the square table. Each woman had at her right a flat brick on which to set her iron. In the center of the table was a dish of water with a rag and brush in it, and also a bunch of tall white lilies in a broken jar.

Madame Putois had attacked the basket of linen prepared by Gervaise, and Augustine was ironing her towels, with her nose in the air, deeply interested in a fly that was buzzing about. As to Clemence she was polishing off her thirty-five shirt; as she boasted of this great feat, Goujet staggered toward her.

"Madame," she called, "please keep him away, he will bother me and I shall scorch my hit."

"Let her be," said Gervaise, without any especial energy, "we are in a great hurry to-day!"

Well! that was not his fault, he did only want to see what she was about.

"Really," said his wife, looking up from her fluting iron. "I think you had best go to bed."

He began to talk again. "You need not make such a fuss, Clemence, it is only because these women are here, and—"

But he could say no more, Gervaise quietly laid one hand on his mouth and the other on his shoulder and pushed him toward his room. He struggled a little, and with a silly laugh asked if Clemence was not coming too.

Gervaise undressed her husband and tucked him up in bed as if he had been a child, and then returned to her fluting iron in time to still a grand dispute that was going on about an iron that had not been properly cleaned.

In the profound silence that followed her appearance, she could hear her husband's thick voice.

"What a silly wife I've got! The idea of putting me to bed in broad daylight!"

Suddenly he began to snore, and Gervaise uttered a sigh of relief. She used her fluting iron for a minute, and then said quietly:

"There is no need of being offended by anything a man does when he is in this state. He is not an accountable being. He did not intend to insult you. Clem-

ence, you know what a tipsy man is—he respects neither father nor mother."

She uttered these words in an indifferent, matter-of-fact way, not in the least disturbed that he had forgotten the respect due to her and to her roof, and really seeing no harm in his conduct.

The work now went steadily on, and Gervaise calculated they would have finished by eleven o'clock. The heat was intense; the smell of charcoal deadened the air; while the branch of white lilies slowly faded, and filled the room with their sweetness.

The day after all this, Goujet had a terrible headache, and did not rise until late—too late to go to his work. About noon he began to feel better, and toward evening was quite himself. His wife gave him some silver, and told him to go out and take the air, which meant with him, taking some wine.

One glass washed down another, but he came home as gay as a lark, and quite disgusted with the men he had seen who were drinking themselves to death.

"Where is your lover?" he said to his wife, as he entered the shop. This was his favorite joke. "I never see him nowadays, and must hunt him up."

He meant Goujet, who came but rarely, to tell the gossip in the neighborhood should take it upon themselves to gabble. Once in about ten days he made his appearance in the evening, and installed himself in a corner in the back shop, with his pipe. He rarely spoke, but laughed at all Gervaise said.

On Saturday evenings the establishment was kept open half the night. A lamp hung from the ceiling, with the light thrown down by a shade. The shutters were put up at the usual time, out as the nights were very warm, the door was left open; and as the hours wore on, the women pulled their jackets open a little more at the throat, and sat in his corner and looked on as if he were at a theatre.

The silence of the street was broken by a passing carriage. Two o'clock struck—no longer a sound from outside. At half-past two a man hurried past the door, carrying with him a vision of flying arms, piles of white linen, and a glow of yellow light.

Goujet, wishing to save Gervaise from Goujet's rough treatment, had taken him to the place where he was employed, to blow the bellows, with the prospect of becoming an apprentice as soon as he was old enough; and Gervaise thus became another tie between the clear starcher and the blacksmith.

All their little world laughed, and told Gervaise that her friend worshipped the very ground she trod upon. She colored and looked like a girl of sixteen.

"Dear boy," she said to herself, "I know he loves me; but never has he said, or will he say, a word of the kind to me!" And she was proud of being loved in this way. When she was disturbed about anything, her first thought was to go to him. When by chance they were left alone together, they were never disturbed by wondering if their friendship verged on love. There was no harm in such affection.

Nana was now six years old and a most troublesome little sprite. Her mother took her every morning to a school in la Rue Poiteau, to a certain Mademoiselle Josse. Here she did all manner of mischief. She put ashes into the teacher's snuff box, pinned the skirts of her companions together. Twice the young lady was sent home in disgrace, and then taken back again for the sake of the six francs each month.

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was, of course, a complete break between the old friends.

But, in fact, the quarrel had been growing for a month. Gervaise, garrulous by nature, and knowing the tastes of the Boche people, was in the habit of making them constant presents—oranges, a little hot soup, a cake, or something of the kind. One evening, knowing that the Concierge would sell her soul for a good salad, she took her the remains of a dish of beets and chicory. The next day she was dumbfounded at hearing from Mademoiselle Remançon, how Madame Boche had thrown the salad away, saying she was not reduced to eating the leavings of other people! From that day forth, Gervaise sent her nothing more. The Boches had learned to look on her little offerings as their right, and they now felt themselves being robbed by the Goujettes.

"Ah! Goujet, yes. If it is Goujet you wish to see, go to the left." Gervaise obeyed his instructions and found herself in a large room, with the forge at the further end. She spoke to the first man she saw, when suddenly the whole room was one blaze of light. The bellows had sent up leaping flames which lighted every crevice and corner of the dusty old building, and Gervaise recognized Goujet before the forge, with two other men. She went toward him.

"Madame Gervaise!" he exclaimed in surprise, his face radiant with joy, and then seeing his companions laugh and wink, he pushed Etienne toward his mother. "You came to see your boy," he said