

L'ASSOMMOIR.

Continued From Second Page.

and who did not wish to be outdone in politeness, said:

"I beg your pardon—"

"Pray don't apologize," answered Virginie, in a stately fashion.

And they stood and talked for a few minutes with not the smallest allusion, however, to the past.

Virginie, then about twenty-nine, was really a magnificent looking woman; head well-set on her shoulders, and a long, oval face crowned by bands of glossy black hair. She told her history in a few brief words. She was married. Had married the previous spring a cabinetmaker who had given up his trade, and was hoping to obtain a position on the police force. She had just been out to buy this mackerel for him.

"He adores them," she said, "and we women spoil our husbands, I think. But come up. We are standing in a draught here."

When Gervaise had in her turn told her story, and added that Virginie was living in the very rooms where she had lived, and where her child was born, Virginie became still more urgent that she should go up. "It is always pleasant to see a place where one has been happy," she said. "She herself had been living on the other side of the water, but had got tired of it, and had moved into these rooms only two weeks ago. She was not settled yet. Her name was Madame Poisson."

"And mine," said Gervaise, "is Coureau."

Gervaise was a little suspicious of all this courtesy. Might not some terrible revenge be hidden under it all? and she determined to be well on her guard. But as Virginie was so polite just now, she must be polite in her turn.

Poisson, the husband, was a man of thirty-five, with mustache and imperial; he was seated at a table near the window, making little boxes. His only tools were a penknife, a tiny saw and a glue pot; he was executing the most wonderful carving, however. He never sold his work but made presents of it to his friends. It amused him while he was waiting for his appointment.

Poisson rose, and bowed politely to Gervaise, whom his wife called an old friend. But he did not speak—his conversational powers not being his strong point. He cast a plaintive glance at the mackerel, however, from time to time. Gervaise looked around the room, and described her furniture, and where it had stood. How strange it was, after losing sight of each other so long, that they should occupy the same apartment! Virginie entered into new details. He had a small inheritance from his aunt, and she herself sewed a little—made a dress now and then. At the end of a half hour Gervaise rose to depart; Virginie went to the head of the stairs with her, and there both hesitated. Gervaise fancied that Virginie wished to say something about Lantier and Adele, but they separated without touching on these disagreeable topics.

This was the beginning of a great friendship. In another week Virginie could not pass the shop without going in, and sometimes she remained for two or three hours. At first, Gervaise was very uncomfortable: she thought every time Virginie opened her lips that she would hear Lantier's name. Lantier was in her mind all the time she was with Madame Poisson. It was a stupid thing to do after all, for what on earth did she care what had become of Lantier or of Adele? but she was none the less curious to know something about them.

Winter had come—the fourth winter that the Coupeaus had spent in La Rue de la Goutte d'Or. This year December and January were especially severe, and after New Year's the snow lay three weeks in the street without melting.

There was plenty of work for Gervaise, and her shop was delightfully warm and singularly quiet, for the carriages made no noise on the snow covered streets. The laughs and the shouts of the children were almost the only sounds; they had made a long slide, and enjoyed themselves hugely.

Gervaise took especial pleasure in her coffee at noon. Her apprentices had no reason to complain, for it was hot and strong and unadulterated by chicory. On the morning of the twelfth Day the clock had struck twelve and then half-past, and the coffee was not ready. Gervaise was ironing some muslin curtains. Clemence, with a frightful cold, was as usual at work on a man's shirt. Madame Putois was ironing a skirt on a board, with a cloth laid on the floor to prevent the skirt from being soiled. Mamma Coureau brought in the coffee, and as each one of the women took a cup with a sigh of enjoyment, the street door opened, and Virginie came in with a rush of cold air.

"Heaven!" she cried, "it is awful! my ears are cut off!"

"You have come just in time for a cup of hot coffee," said Gervaise, cordially.

"And I shall be only too glad to have it!" answered Virginie, with a shiver. She had been waiting at the grocer's, she said, until she was chilled through and through. The heat of that room was delicious, and then she stirred her coffee, and she liked the damp, sweet smell of the freshly ironed linen. She and Mamma Coureau were the only ones who had chairs; the other, sat on wooden footstools, so low that they seemed to be on the floor. Virginie suddenly stooped down to her hostess, and said, with a smile:

"Do you remember the day at the Lavatory?"

Gervaise colored; she could not answer. This was just what she had been dreading. In a moment she felt sure she should hear Lantier's name. She knew it was coming. Virginie drew nearer to her. The apprentices lingered over their coffee, and told each other, as they looked stupidly into the street, what they would do if they had an income of ten thousand francs. Virginie changed her seat, and took a footstool by the side of Gervaise, who felt weak and cowardly, and helpless, to change the conversation, or to stave off what was coming. She breathlessly awaited the next words, her heart big with an emotion which she would not acknowledge to herself.

"I do not wish to give you any pain," said Virginie, blandly. "Twenty times the words have been on my lips, but

hesitated. Pray don't think I bear you any malice."

She tipped up her cup and drank the last drop of her coffee. Gervaise, with her heart in her mouth, waited in a dull agony of suspense, asking herself if Virginie could have forgiven the insult in the Lavatory. There was a glitter in the woman's eyes she did not like.

"You had an excuse," Virginie added, as she placed her cup on the table. "You had been abominably treated. I should have killed some one," and then dropping her little affected tone, she continued more rapidly—

"They were not happy, I assure you, not at all happy. They lived in a dirty street, where the mud was up to their knees. I went to breakfast with them two days after he left you, and found them in the height of a quarrel. You know that Adele is a wretch. She is my sister, to be sure, but she is a wretch all the same. As to Lantier—well, you know him, so I need not describe him. But for a 'yes' or a 'no,' he would not hesitate to thrash any woman that lives. Oh, they had a beautiful time! their quarrels were heard all over the neighborhood. One day the police were sent for, they had such a hubbub."

She talked on and on, telling things that were enough to make the hair stand up on one's head. Gervaise listened, as pale as death, with a nervous trembling of her lips which might have been taken for a smile. For seven years she had never heard Lantier's name, and she would not have believed that she could have felt any such overwhelming agitation. She could no longer be jealous of Adele, but she smiled grimly as she thought of the blows she had received in her turn from Lantier, and she would have listened for hours to hear all that Virginie had to tell; but she did not ask a question for some time. Finally she said:

"And do they still live in that same place?"

"No, indeed! but I have not told you all yet. They separated a week ago."

"Separated!" exclaimed the clear-starcher.

"Who is separated?" asked Clemence, interrupting her conversation with Mamma Coureau.

"No one," said Virginie, "or at least no one whom you know."

As she spoke she looked at Gervaise, and seemed to take a positive delight in disturbing her still morn. She suddenly asked her, what she would do or say if Lantier should suddenly make his appearance, for men were so strange, no one could ever tell what they would do—Lantier was quite capable of returning to his old love. Then Gervaise interrupted her and rose to the occasion. She answered with grave, quiet dignity that she was married now, and that if Lantier should appear she should ask him to leave. There could never be anything between them, not even the most distant acquaintance.

"I know very well," she said, "that Etienne belongs to him, and if Lantier desires to see his son, I shall place no obstacle in his way. But as to myself, Madame Poisson, he shall never touch my little finger again! It is finished."

As she uttered these last words she traced a cross in the air to seal her oath; and as if desirous to put an end to the conversation, she called out to her women—

"Do you think the ironing will be done to day, if you sit still? To work! to work!"

The women did not move; they were lulled to apathy by the heat, and Gervaise herself found it very difficult to resume her labors. Her curtains had dried in all this time, and some coffee had been spilled on them, and she must wash out the spots.

"Au revoir!" said Virginie. "I came out to buy a half-pound of cheese. I am sure you will think I am frozen to death!"

The better part of the day was now gone, and it was this way every day—for the shop was the refuge and haunt of all the chilly people in the neighborhood. Gervaise liked the reputation of having the most comfortable room in the Quarter, and she held her receptions—a the Lorileux and Boche clique said, with a snif of disdain. She would, in fact, have liked to bring in the very poor whom she saw shivering outside. She became very friendly toward a journeyman painter, an old man of seventy, who lived in a loft of the house, where he shivered with cold and hunger. He had lost his three sons in the Crimea, and for two years his hand had been so cramped by rheumatism that he could not hold a brush.

Whenever Gervaise saw Father Bru she called him in, made a place for him near the stove, and gave him some bread and cheese. Father Bru, with his white beard, and his face wrinkled like an old apple, sat in silent content, for hours at a time, enjoying the warmth and cracking of the coke.

"What are you thinking about?" Gervaise would say, gayly.

"Of nothing—of all sorts of things," he would reply, with a dazed air.

The workmen lang ed and thought it a good joke to ask if he were in love. He paid little heed to them, but relaxed into silent thought.

From this time Virginie often spoke to Gervaise of Lantier, and one day she said she had just met him. But as the clear-starcher made no reply, Virginie then said no more. But in the next day she returned to the subject, and told her that he had talked long and tenderly of her. Gervaise was much troubled by these whispered confidences in no corner of her shop. The son of Lantier made her tain and sit at her heart. She believed herself to be a honest woman. She meant, in every way, to do right and to shun the wrong, but just she felt that only in doing so she would be happy. She did not think much of Coureau, because she was conscious of no shaming toward him. But she thought of her friend at the Forge, and it seemed to her that this star of her sisterhood in Lantier, tame and undecided as it was, was an infidelity to Gervaise, and that tender friendship which had become so very precious to her. Her heart was much too blest to be sad. She dwelt on that time when her first lover left her. She imagined it every day, when quiting Adele, he never returned to her with the old smile.

When he went away, it was with a pained expression, and his face was faintly flushed. She for a long time did not know what he was like? She thought of Lantier and her husband, and wondered if there was any man in the world.

TO BE CONTINUED.

and this idea brought a cold sweat to her forehead, because he would certainly kiss her on her ear, as he had often teased her by doing in the years gone by. It was this kiss she dreaded. Its dull reverberation deafened her to all outside sounds, and she could hear only the beatings of her own heart. When these terrors assailed her, the Forge was her only asylum, from whence she returned smiling and serene, feeling that Goujet—whose sonorous hammer had put all her dreams to flight—would protect her always.

What a happy season was this after all! The clear-starcher always carried a certain basket of clothes to her customer each week, because it gave her a pretext for going into the Forge, as it was on her way. As soon as she turned the corner of the street in which it was situated, she felt as light-headed as if she were going to the country. The black charcoal dust in the road, the black smoke rising slowly from the chimneys, interested and pleased her as much as a mossy path through the woods. Afar off the forge was red even at mid-day, and her heart danced in time with the hammers. Goujet was expecting her and making more noise than usual, that she might hear him at a greater distance. She gave Etienne a light tap on his cheek, and sat quietly watching these two—this man and boy, who were so dear to her—for an hour without speaking.

When the sparks touched her tender skin she rather enjoyed the sensation. He, in his turn, was fully aware of the happiness she felt in being there, and he reserved the work which required skill for the time when she could look on in wonder and admiration. It was an idyl that they were unconsciously enacting all that spring, and when Gervaise returned to her home, it was in a spirit of sweet content.

By degrees her unreasonable fears of Lantier were conquered. Coureau was behaving very badly at this time, and one evening, as she passed the Assommoir, she was certain she saw him drinking with Mes Bottes. She hurried on lest she should seem to be watching him. But as she hastened she looked over her shoulder. Yes, it was Coureau who was tossing down a glass of liquor with an air as if it were no new thing. He had lied to her, then; he did drink brandy. She was in utter despair, and all her old horror of brandy returned. Wine she could have forgiven—wine was good for a working man; liquor, on the contrary, was his ruin, and took from him all desire for the food that nourished, and gave him strength for his daily toil. Why did not the government interfere and prevent the manufacture of such pernicious things?

When she reached her home she found the whole house in confusion. Her employees had left their work and were in the court-yard. She asked what the matter was.

"It is Father Bijard beating his wife; he is as drunk as a fool, and he drove her up stairs to her room, where he is murdering her. Just listen!"

Gervaise flew up the stairs. She was very fond of Madame Bijard, who was her laundress, and whose courage and industry she greatly admired. On the sixth floor a little crowd was assembled. Madame Boche stood at an open door.

"I have done! I have done!" she cried: "have done! or the police will be summoned."

No one dared to enter the room, because Bijard was well known to be like a madman when he was tipsy. He was rarely thoroughly sober; and on the occasional days when he descended to work, he always had a bottle of brandy at his side. He rarely ate anything, and if a match had been touched to his mouth he would have taken fire like a torch.

"Would you let her be killed?" exclaimed Gervaise, trembling from head to foot, and she entered the attic room, which was very clean and very bare, for he man had sold the very sheets off the bed to satisfy his mad passion for drink. In this terrible struggle for life the table had been thrown over and the two chairs also. On the floor lay the poor woman, with her skirts drenched as she had come from the wash-tub, her hair streaming over her bloody face, uttering low groans at each kick the brute gave her.

The neighbors whispered to each other that she had refused to give him the money he had earned that day. Boche called up the staircase to his wife:

"Come down, I say; let him kill her if he will; it will only make one fool the less in the world!"

Father Bru followed Gervaise into the room, and the two expostulated with the man. But he turned toward them and said threateningly: a white foam glistened on his lips, and in his faded eyes was a murderous expression. He was Father Bru by the shoulder, and thrown over the table, and shook Gervaise until her teeth chattered, and then returned to his wife, who lay motionless, with her mouth wide open and eyes closed; and during this frightful scene, Lantier, four years old, was in the corner looking on at the murder of his mother. The child's arms were around his sister. He rentie, a baby who had been weaned. She stood with a pale, thin face, and serious, melancholy, but shed no tears.

W. B. Bijard slipped and fell, Gervaise

and Father Bru helped the poor creature to the floor, who then burst into sobs. Lantier went to her side, but she did not notice him. The child was already habituated to such scenes. And as Gervaise went up the stairs, she was haunted by the strange look of resignation and courage in Lantier's eyes—it was an expression belonging to maturity and experience, rare rakan to children.

"Your husband is on the other side of the street," said Clemence, as soon as she saw Gervaise; "he is as tipsy as possible!"

He reeled in, breaking a square of glass with his shoulder as he missed the doorway. He was not tipsy, but drunk, with his teeth set tightly together, and a pinched expression about the nose. And Gervaise instantly knew that it was the liquor of the Assommoir which had virated his blood. She tried to smile, and coaxed him to go to bed. But he took her off, and as he passed her gave

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