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L'ASSOMMOIR

EMILE ZOLA

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Duke Classics

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Chapter I

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Gervaise had waited up for Lantier until two in the morning. Then, shivering from having remained in a thin loose jacket, exposed to the fresh air at the window, she had thrown herself across the bed, drowsy, feverish, and her cheeks bathed in tears.

For a week past, on leaving the "Two-Headed Calf," where they took their meals, he had sent her home with the children and never reappeared himself till late at night, alleging that he had been in search of work. That evening, while watching for his return, she thought she had seen him enter the dancing-hall of the "Grand-Balcony," the ten blazing windows of which lighted up with the glare of a conflagration against the dark expanse of the exterior Boulevards; and five or six paces behind him, she had caught sight of little Adele, a burnisher, who dined at the same restaurant, swinging her hands, as if she had just quitted his arm so as not to pass together under the dazzling light of the globes at the door.

When, towards five o'clock, Gervaise awoke, stiff and sore, she broke forth into sobs. Lantier had not returned. For the first time he had slept away from home. She remained seated on the edge of the bed under the strip of faded chintz, which hung from the rod fastened to the ceiling by a piece of string. And slowly, with her eyes veiled by tears, she glanced round the wretched lodging, furnished with a walnut chest of drawers, minus one drawer, three rush-bottomed chairs, and a little greasy table, on which stood a broken water-jug. There had been added, for the children, an iron bedstead, which prevented any one getting to the chest of drawers, and filled two-thirds of the room. Gervaise's and Lantier's trunk, wide open, in one corner, displayed its emptiness, and a man's old hat right at the bottom almost buried beneath some dirty shirts and socks; whilst, against the walls, above the articles of furniture, hung a shawl full of holes, and a pair of trousers begrimed with mud, the last rags which the dealers in second-hand clothes declined to buy. In the centre of the mantel-piece, lying between two odd zinc candle-sticks, was a bundle of pink pawn-tickets. It was the best room of the hotel, the first floor room, looking on to the Boulevard.

The two children were sleeping side by side, with their heads on the same pillow. Claude, aged eight years, was breathing quietly, with his little hands thrown outside the coverlet; while Etienne, only four years old, was smiling, with one arm round his brother's neck! And bare-footed, without thinking of it, she again put on the old shoes that had fallen on the floor, she resumed her position at the window, her eyes searching the pavements in the distance.

The hotel was situated on the Boulevard de la Chapelle, to the left of the Barriere Poissonniere. It was a building of two stories high, painted a red, of the color of wine dregs, up to the second floor, and with shutters all rotted by the rain. Over a lamp with starred panes of glass, one could manage to read between the two windows, the words, "Hotel Boncoeur, kept by Marsoullier," painted in big yellow letters, several pieces of which the moldering of the plaster had carried away. The lamp preventing her seeing, Gervaise raised herself on tiptoe, still holding the handkerchief to her lips. She looked to the right, towards the Boulevard Rochechouart, where groups of butchers, in aprons smeared with blood, were hanging about in front of the slaughter-houses; and the fresh breeze wafted occasionally a stench

of slaughtered beasts. Looking to the left, she scanned a long avenue that ended nearly in front of her where the white mass of the Lariboisiere Hospital was then in course of construction. Slowly, from one end of the horizon to the other, she followed the octroi wall, behind which she sometimes heard during night time, the shrieks of persons being murdered; and she searchingly looked into the remote angles, the dark corners, black with humidity and filth, fearing to discern there Lantier's body, stabbed to death.

She looked at the endless gray wall that surrounded the city with its belt of desolation. When she raised her eyes higher, she became aware of a bright burst of sunlight. The dull hum of the city awakening already filled the air. Craning her neck to look at the Poissonniere gate, she remained for some time watching the constant stream of men, horses, and carts which flooded down from the heights of Montmartre and La Chapelle, pouring between the two squat octroi lodges. It was like a herd of plodding cattle, an endless throng widened by sudden stoppages into eddies that spilled off the sidewalks into the street, a steady procession of laborers on their way back to work with tools slung over their back and a loaf of bread under their arm. This human inundation kept pouring down into Paris to be constantly swallowed up. Gervaise leaned further out at the risk of falling when she thought she recognized Lantier among the throng. She pressed the handkerchief tighter against her mouth, as though to push back the pain within her.

The sound of a young and cheerful voice caused her to leave the window.

"So the old man isn't here, Madame Lantier?"

"Why, no, Monsieur Coupeau," she replied, trying to smile.

Coupeau, a zinc-worker who occupied a ten franc room on the top floor, having seen the door unlocked, had walked in as friends will do.

"You know," he continued, "I'm now working over there in the hospital. What beautiful May weather isn't it? The air is rather sharp this morning."

And he looked at Gervaise's face, red with weeping. When he saw that the bed had not been slept in, he shook his head gently; then he went to the children's couch where they were sleeping, looking as rosy as cherubs, and, lowering his voice, he said,

"Come, the old man's not been home, has he? Don't worry yourself, Madame Lantier. He's very much occupied with politics. When they were voting for Eugene Sue the other day, he was acting almost crazy. He has very likely spent the night with some friends blackguarding crapulous Bonaparte."

"No, no," she murmured with an effort. "You don't think that. I know where Lantier is. You see, we have our little troubles like the rest of the world!"

Coupeau winked his eye, to indicate he was not a dupe of this falsehood; and he went off, after offering to fetch her milk, if she did not care to go out: she was a good and courageous woman, and might count upon him on any day of trouble.

As soon as he was gone, Gervaise again returned to the window. At the Barriere, the tramp of the cart-drove still continued in the morning air: locksmiths in short blue blouses, masons in white jackets,

house painters in overcoats over long smocks. From a distance the crowd looked like a chalky smudge of neutral hue composed chiefly of faded blue and dingy gray. When one of the workers occasionally stopped to light his pipe the others kept plodding past him, without sparing a laugh or a word to a comrade. With cheeks gray as clay, their eyes were continually drawn toward Paris which was swallowing them one by one.

At both corners of the Rue des Poissonniers however, some of the men slackened their pace as they neared the doors of the two wine-dealers who were taking down their shutters; and, before entering they stood on the edge of the pavement, looking sideways over Paris, with no strength in their arms and already inclined for a day of idleness. Inside various groups were already buying rounds of drink or just standing around, forgetting their troubles, crowding up the place, coughing, spitting, clearing their throats with sip after sip.

Gervaise was watching Pere Colombe's wineshop to the left of the street, where she thought she had seen Lantier, when a stout woman, bareheaded and wearing an apron called to her from the middle of the roadway:

"Hey, Madame Lantier, you're up very early!"

Gervaise leaned out. "Why! It's you, Madame Boche! Oh! I've got a lot of work to-day!"

"Yes, things don't do themselves, do they?"

The conversation continued between roadway and window. Madame Boche was concierge of the building where the "Two-Headed Calf" was on the ground floor. Gervaise had waited for Lantier more than once in the concierge's lodge, so as not to be alone at table with all the men who ate at the restaurant. Madame Boche was going to a tailor who was late in mending an overcoat for her husband. She mentioned one of her tenants who had come in with a woman the night before and kept everybody awake past three in the morning. She looked at Gervaise with intense curiosity.

"Is Monsieur Lantier, then, still in bed?" she asked abruptly.

"Yes, he's asleep," replied Gervaise, who could not avoid blushing.

Madame Boche saw the tears come into her eyes; and, satisfied no doubt, she turned to go, declaring the men to be a cursed, lazy set. As she went off, she called back:

"It's this morning you go to the wash-house, isn't it? I've something to wash, too. I'll keep you a place next to me, and we can chat together." Then, as if moved with sudden pity, she added:

"My poor little thing, you had far better not remain there; you'll take harm. You look quite blue with cold."

Gervaise still obstinately remained at the window during two mortal hours, till eight o'clock. Now all the shops had opened. Only a few work men were still hurrying along.

The working girls now filled the boulevard: metal polishers, milliners, flower sellers, shivering in their thin clothing. In small groups they chattered gaily, laughing and glancing here and there. Occasionally there would be one girl by herself, thin, pale, serious-faced, picking her way along the

city wall among the puddles and the filth.

After the working girls, the office clerks came past, breathing upon their chilled fingers and munching penny rolls. Some of them are gaunt young fellows in ill-fitting suits, their tired eyes still fogged from sleep. Others are older men, stooped and tottering, with faces pale and drawn from long hours office work and glancing nervously at their watches for fear of arriving late.

In time the Boulevards settle into their usual morning quiet. Old folks come out to stroll in the sun. Tired young mothers in bedraggled skirts cuddle babies in their arms or sit on a bench to change diapers. Children run, squealing and laughing, pushing and shoving.

Then Gervaise felt herself choking, dizzy with anguish, all hopes gone; it seemed to her that everything was ended, even time itself, and that Lantier would return no more. Her eyes vacant wandered from the old slaughter-house, foul with butchery and with stench, to the new white hospital which, through the yawning openings of its ranges of windows, disclosed the naked wards, where death was preparing to mow. In front of her on the other side of the octroi wall the bright heaven dazzled her, with the rising sun which rose higher and higher over the vast awaking city.

The young woman was seated on a chair, no longer crying, and with her hands abandoned on her lap when Lantier quietly entered the room.

"It's you! It's you!" she cried, rising to throw herself upon his neck.

"Yes, it's me. What of it?" he replied. "You are not going to begin any of your nonsense, I hope!"

He had pushed her aside. Then, with a gesture of ill-humor he threw his black felt hat to the chest-drawers. He was a young fellow of twenty-six years of age, short and very dark, with a handsome figure, and slight moustaches which his hand was always mechanically twirling. He wore a workman's overalls and an old soiled overcoat, which he had belted tightly at the waist, and he spoke with a strong Provençal accent.

Gervaise, who had fallen back on her chair, gently complained, in short sentences: "I've not had a wink of sleep. I feared some harm had happened to you. Where have you been? Where did you spend the night? For heaven's sake! Don't do it again, or I shall go crazy. Tell me Auguste, where have you been?"

"Where I had business, of course," he returned shrugging his shoulders. "At eight o'clock, I was at the Glaciere, with my friend who is to start a hat factory. We sat talking late, so I preferred to sleep there. Now, you know, I don't like being spied upon, so just shut up!"

The young woman recommenced sobbing. The loud voices and the rough movements of Lantier, who upset the chairs, had awakened the children. They sat up in bed, half naked, disentangling their hair with their tiny hands, and, hearing their mother weep, they uttered terrible screams, crying also with their scarcely open eyes.

"Ah! there's the music!" shouted Lantier furiously. "I warn you, I'll take my hook! And it will be for good, this time. You won't shut up? Then, good morning! I'll return to the place I've just come from."

He had already taken his hat from off the chest of drawers. But Gervaise threw herself before him stammering: "No, no!"

And she hushed the little ones' tears with her caresses, smoothed their hair, and soothed them with soft words. The children, suddenly quieted, laughing on their pillow, amused themselves by punching each other. The father however, without even taking off his boots, had thrown himself on the bed looking worn out, his face bearing signs of having been up all night. He did not go to sleep, he lay with his eyes wide open, looking round the room.

"It's a mess here!" he muttered. And after observing Gervaise a moment, he malignantly added: "Don't you even wash yourself now?"

Gervaise was twenty-two, tall and slim with fine features, but she was already beginning to show the strain of her hard life. She seemed to have aged ten years from the hours of agonized weeping. Lantier's mean remark made her mad.

"You're not fair," she said spiritedly. "You well know I do all I can. It's not my fault we find ourselves here. I would like to see you, with two children, in a room where there's not even a stove to heat some water. When we arrived in Paris, instead of squandering your money, you should have made a home for us at once, as you promised."

"Listen!" Lantier exploded. "You cracked the nut with me; it doesn't become you to sneer at it now!"

Apparently not listening, Gervaise went on with her own thought. "If we work hard we can get out of the hole we're in. Madame Fauconnier, the laundress on Rue Neuve, will start me on Monday. If you work with your friend from La Glaciere, in six months we will be doing well. We'll have enough for decent clothes and a place we can call our own. But we'll have to stick with it and work hard."

Lantier turned over towards the wall, looking greatly bored. Then Gervaise lost her temper.

"Yes, that's it, I know the love of work doesn't trouble you much. You're bursting with ambition, you want to be dressed like a gentleman. You don't think me nice enough, do you, now that you've made me pawn all my dresses? Listen, Auguste, I didn't intend to speak of it, I would have waited a bit longer, but I know where you spent the night; I saw you enter the 'Grand-Balcony' with that trollop Adele. Ah! you choose them well! She's a nice one, she is! She does well to put on the airs of a princess! She's been the ridicule of every man who frequents the restaurant."

At a bound Lantier sprang from the bed. His eyes had become as black as ink in his pale face. With this little man, rage blew like a tempest.

"Yes, yes, of every man who frequents the restaurant!" repeated the young woman. "Madame Bock intends to give them notice, she and her long stick of a sister, because they've always a string of me after them on the staircase."

Lantier raised his fists; then, resisting the desire of striking her, he seized hold of her by the arm, shook her violently and sent her sprawling upon the bed of the children, who recommenced crying. And he lay down again, mumbling, like a man resolving on something that he previously hesitated to do:

"You don't know what you've done, Gervaise. You've made a big mistake; you'll see."

For an instant the children continued sobbing. Their mother, who remained bending over the bed, held them both in her embrace, and kept repeating the same words in a monotonous tone of voice.

"Ah! if it weren't for you! My poor little ones! If it weren't for you! If it weren't for you!"

Stretched out quietly, his eyes raised to the faded strip of chintz, Lantier no longer listened, but seemed to be buried in a fixed idea. He remained thus for nearly an hour, without giving way to sleep in spite of the fatigue which weighed his eyelids down.

He finally turned toward Gervaise, his face set hard in determination. She had gotten the children undressed and had almost finished cleaning the room. The room looked, as always, dark and depressing with its sooty black ceiling and paper peeling from the damp walls. The dilapidated furniture was always streaked and dirty despite frequent dustings. Gervaise, devouring her grief, trying to assume a look of indifference, hurried over her work.

Lantier watched as she tidied her hair in front of the small mirror hanging near the window. While she washed herself he looked at her bare arms and shoulders. He seemed to be making comparisons in his mind as his lips formed a grimace. Gervaise limped with her right leg, though it was scarcely noticeable except when she was tired. To-day, exhausted from remaining awake all night, she was supporting herself against the wall and dragging her leg.

Neither one spoke, they had nothing more to say. Lantier seemed to be waiting, while Gervaise kept busy and tried to keep her countenance expressionless. Finally, while she was making a bundle of the dirty clothes thrown in a corner, behind the trunk, he at length opened his lips and asked:

"What are you doing there? Where are you going?"

She did not answer at first. Then, when he furiously repeated his question, she made up her mind, and said:

"I suppose you can see for yourself. I'm going to wash all this. The children can't live in filth."

He let her pick up two or three handkerchiefs. And, after a fresh pause, he resumed: "Have you got any money?"

At these words she stood up and looked him full in the face, without leaving go of the children's dirty clothes, which she held in her hand.

"Money! And where do you think I can have stolen any? You know well enough that I got three francs the day before yesterday on my black skirt. We've lunched twice off it, and money goes quick at the pork-butcher's. No, you may be quite sure I've no money. I've four sous for the wash-house. I don't have an extra income like some women."

He let this allusion pass. He had moved off the bed, and was passing in review the few rags hanging about the room. He ended by taking up the pair of trousers and the shawl, and searching the drawers; he added two chemises and a woman's loose jacket to the parcel; then, he threw the whole bundle into Gervaise's arms, saying:

"Here, go and pop this."

"Don't you want me to pop the children as well?" asked she. "Eh! If they lent on children, it would be fine riddance!"

She went to the pawn-place, however. When she returned at the end of half an hour, she laid a hundred sou piece on the mantel-shelf, and added the ticket to the others, between the two candlesticks.

"That's what they gave me," said she. "I wanted six francs, but I couldn't manage it. Oh! they'll never ruin themselves. And there's always such a crowd there!"

Lantier did not pick up the five franc piece directly. He would rather that she got change, so as to leave her some of it. But he decided to slip it into his waistcoat pocket, when he noticed a small piece of ham wrapped up in paper, and the remains of a loaf on the chest of drawers.

"I didn't dare go to the milkwoman's, because we owe her a week," explained Gervaise. "But I shall be back early; you can get some bread and some chops whilst I'm away, and then we'll have lunch. Bring also a bottle of wine."

He did not say no. Their quarrel seemed to be forgotten. The young woman was completing her bundle of dirty clothes. But when she went to take Lantier's shirts and socks from the bottom of the trunk, he called to her to leave them alone.

"Leave my things, d'ye hear? I don't want 'em touched!"

"What's it you don't want touched?" she asked, rising up. "I suppose you don't mean to put these filthy things on again, do you? They must be washed."

She studied his boyishly handsome face, now so rigid that it seemed nothing could ever soften it. He angrily grabbed his things from her and threw them back into the trunk, saying:

"Just obey me, for once! I tell you I won't have 'em touched!"

"But why?" she asked, turning pale, a terrible suspicion crossing her mind. "You don't need your shirts now, you're not going away. What can it matter to you if I take them?"

He hesitated for an instant, embarrassed by the piercing glance she fixed upon him. "Why—why—stammered he, "because you go and tell everyone that you keep me, that you wash and mend. Well! that worries me, there! Attend to your own business and I'll attend to mine, washerwomen don't work for dogs."

She supplicated, she protested she had never complained; but he roughly closed the trunk and sat down upon it, saying, "No!" to her face. He could surely do as he liked with what belonged to him! Then, to escape from the inquiring looks she leveled at him, he went and laid down on the bed again, saying that he was sleepy, and requesting her not to make his head ache with any more of her row. This time indeed, he seemed to fall asleep. Gervaise, for a while, remained undecided. She was tempted to kick the bundle of dirty clothes on one side, and to sit down and sew. But Lantier's regular breathing ended by reassuring her. She took the ball of blue and the piece of soap remaining from her last washing, and

going up to the little ones who were quietly playing with some old corks in front of the window, she kissed them, and said in a low voice:

"Be very good, don't make any noise; papa's asleep."

When she left the room, Claude's and Etienne's gentle laughter alone disturbed the great silence beneath the blackened ceiling. It was ten o'clock. A ray of sunshine entered by the half open window.

On the Boulevard, Gervaise turned to the left, and followed the Rue Neuve de la Goutte-d'Or. As she passed Madame Fauconnier's shop, she slightly bowed her head. The wash-house she was bound for was situated towards the middle of the street, at the part where the roadway commenced to ascend.

The rounded, gray contours of the three large zinc wash tanks, studded with rivets, rose above the flat roofed building. Behind them was the drying room, a high second story, closed in on all sides by narrow-slatted lattices so that the air could circulate freely, and through which laundry could be seen hanging on brass wires. The steam engine's smokestack exhaled puffs of white smoke to the right of the water tanks.

Gervaise was used to puddles and did not bother to tuck her skirts up before making her way through the doorway, which was cluttered with jars of bleaching water. She was already acquainted with the mistress of the wash-house, a delicate little woman with red, inflamed eyes, who sat in a small glazed closet with account books in front of her, bars of soap on shelves, balls of blue in glass bowls, and pounds of soda done up in packets; and, as she passed, she asked for her beetle and her scouring-brush which she had left to be taken care of the last time she had done her washing there. Then, after obtaining her number, she entered the wash-house.

It was an immense shed, with large clear windows, and a flat ceiling, showing the beams supported by cast-iron pillars. Pale rays of light passed through the hot steam, which remained suspended like a milky fog. Smoke arose from certain corners, spreading about and covering the recesses with a bluish veil. A heavy moisture hung around, impregnated with a soapy odor, a damp insipid smell, continuous though at moments overpowered by the more potent fumes of the chemicals. Along the washing places, on either side of the central alley, were rows of women, with bare arms and necks, and skirts tucked up, showing colored stockings and heavy lace-up shoes. They were beating furiously, laughing, leaning back to call out a word in the midst of the din, or stooping over their tubs, all of them brutal and ungainly, foul of speech, and soaked as though by a shower, with their flesh red and reeking.

All around the women continuously flowed a river from hot-water buckets emptied with a sudden splash, cold-water faucets left dripping, soap suds spattering, and the dripping from rinsed laundry which was hung up. It splashed their feet and drained away across the sloping flagstones. The din of the shouting and the rhythmic beating was joined by the patter of steady dripping. It was slightly muffled by the moisture-soaked ceiling. Meanwhile, the steam engine could be heard as it puffed and snorted ceaselessly while cloaked in its white mist. The dancing vibration of its flywheel seemed to regulate the volume of the noisy turbulence.

Gervaise passed slowly along the alley, looking to the right and left, carrying her laundry bundle under one arm, with one hip thrust high and limping more than usual. She was jostled by several women in the hubbub.

"This way, my dear!" cried Madame Boche, in her loud voice. Then, when the young woman had joined her at the very end on the left, the concierge, who was furiously rubbing a dirty sock, began to talk incessantly, without leaving off her work. "Put your things there, I've kept your place. Oh, I sha'n't be long over what I've got. Boche scarcely dirties his things at all. And you, you won't be long either will you? Your bundle's quite a little one. Before twelve o'clock we shall have finished, and we can go off to lunch. I used to send my things to a laundress in the Rue Poulet, but she destroyed everything with her chlorine and her brushes; so now I do the washing myself. It's so much saved; it only costs the soap. I say, you should have put those shirts to soak. Those little rascals of children, on my word! One would think their bodies were covered with soot."

Gervaise, having undone her bundle, was spreading out the little ones' shirts, and as Madame Boche advised her to take a pailful of lye, she answered, "Oh, no! warm water will do. I'm used to it." She had sorted her laundry with several colored pieces to one side. Then, after filling her tub with four pails of cold water from the tap behind her, she plunged her pile of whites into it.

"You're used to it?" repeated Madame Boche. "You were a washerwoman in your native place, weren't you, my dear?"

Gervaise, with her sleeves pushed back, displayed the graceful arms of a young blonde, as yet scarcely reddened at the elbows, and started scrubbing her laundry. She spread a shirt out on the narrow rubbing board which was water-bleached and eroded by years of use. She rubbed soap into the shirt, turned it over, and soaped the other side. Before replying to Madame Boche she grasped her beetle and began to pound away so that her shouted phrases were punctuated with loud and rhythmic thumps.

"Yes, yes, a washerwoman—When I was ten—That's twelve years ago—We used to go to the river—The smelt nicer there than it does here—You should have seen, there was a nook under the trees, with clear running water—You know, at Plassans—Don't you know Plassans?—It's near Marseilles."

"How you go at it!" exclaimed Madame Boche, amazed at the strength of her blows. "You could flatten out a piece of iron with your little lady-like arms."

The conversation continued in a very high volume. At times, the concierge, not catching what was said, was obliged to lean forward. All the linen was beaten, and with a will! Gervaise plunged it into the tub again, and then took it out once more, each article separately, to rub it over with soap a second time and brush it. With one hand she held the article firmly on the plank; with the other, which she grasped the short couch-grass brush, she extracted from the linen a dirty lather, which fell in long drips. Then, in the slight noise caused by the brush, the two women drew together, and conversed in a more intimate way.

"No, we're not married," resumed Gervaise. "I don't hide it. Lantier isn't so nice for any one to care to be his wife. If it weren't for the children! I was fourteen and he was eighteen when we had our first one. It happened in the usual way, you know how it is. I wasn't happy at home. Old man Macquart would kick me in the tail whenever he felt like it, for no reason at all. I had to have some fun outside. We might have been married, but—I forget why—our parents wouldn't consent."

She shook her hands, which were growing red in the white suds. "The water's awfully hard in Paris."

Madame Boche was now washing only very slowly. She kept leaving off, making her work last as long

as she could, so as to remain there, to listen to that story, which her curiosity had been hankering to know for a fortnight past. Her mouth was half open in the midst of her big, fat face; her eyes, which were almost at the top of her head, were gleaming. She was thinking, with the satisfaction of having guessed right.

"That's it, the little one gossips too much. There's been a row."

Then, she observed out loud, "He isn't nice, then?"

"Don't mention it!" replied Gervaise. "He used to behave very well in the country; but, since we've been in Paris, he's been unbearable. I must tell you that his mother died last year and left him some money—about seventeen hundred francs. He would come to Paris, so, as old Macquart was forever knocking me about without warning, I consented to come away with him. We made the journey with two children. He was to set me up as a laundress, and work himself at his trade of a hatter. We should have been very happy; but, you see, Lantier's ambitious and a spendthrift, a fellow who only thinks of amusing himself. In short, he's not worth much. On arriving, we went to the Hotel Montmartre, in the Rue Montmartre. And then there were dinners, and cabs, and the theatre; a watch for himself and a suit of dress for me, for he's not unkind when he's got the money. You understand, he went in for everything, and so well that at the end of two months we were cleaned out. It was then that we came to live at the Hotel Boncoeur, and that this horrible life began."

She interrupted herself. A lump had suddenly risen in her throat, and she could scarcely restrain her tears. She had finished brushing the things.

"I must go and fetch my hot water," she murmured.

But Madame Boche, greatly disappointed at this break off in the disclosures, called to the wash-house boy, who was passing, "My little Charles, kindly get madame a pail of hot water; she's in a hurry."

The youth took the bucket and brought it back filled. Gervaise paid him; it was a sou the pailful. She poured the hot water into the tub, and soaped the things a last time with her hands, leaning over the in a mass of steam, which deposited small beads of grey vapor in her light hair.

"Here put some soda in, I've got some by me," said the concierge, obligingly.

And she emptied into Gervaise's tub what remained of a bag of soda which she had brought with her. She also offered her some of the chemical water, but the young woman declined it; it was only good for grease and wine stains.

"I think he's rather a loose fellow," resumed Madame Boche, returning to Lantier, but without naming him.

Gervaise, bent almost double, her hands all shriveled, and thrust in amongst the clothes, merely tossed her head.

"Yes, yes," continued the other, "I have noticed several little things—" But she suddenly interrupted herself, as Gervaise jumped up, with a pale face, and staring wildly at her. Then she exclaimed, "Oh no! I don't know anything! He likes to laugh a bit, I think, that's all. For instance, you know the tv

girls who lodge at my place, Adele and Virginie. Well; he larks about with 'em, but he just flirts for sport."

The young woman standing before her, her face covered with perspiration, the water dripping from her arms, continued to stare at her with a fixed and penetrating look. Then the concierge got excited, giving herself a blow on the chest, and pledging her word of honor, she cried:

"I know nothing, I mean it when I say so!"

Then calming herself, she added in a gentle voice, as if speaking to a person on whom loud protestations would have no effect, "I think he has a frank look about the eyes. He'll marry you, my dear, I'm sure of it."

Gervaise wiped her forehead with her wet hand. Shaking her head again, she pulled another garment out of the water. Both of them kept silence for a moment. The wash-house was quieting down, for eleven o'clock had struck. Half of the washerwomen were perched on the edge of their tubs, eating sausages between slices of bread and drinking from open bottles of wine. Only housewives who had come to launder small bundles of family linen were hurrying to finish.

Occasional beetle blows could still be heard amid the subdued laughter and gossip half-choked by the greedy chewing of jawbones. The steam engine never stopped. Its vibrant, snorting voice seemed to fill the entire hall, though not one of the women even heard it. It was like the breathing of the wash-house, its hot breath collecting under the ceiling rafters in an eternal floating mist.

The heat was becoming intolerable. Through the tall windows on the left sunlight was streaming in, touching the steamy vapors with opalescent tints of soft pinks and grayish blues. Charles went from window to window, letting down the heavy canvas awnings. Then he crossed to the shady side to open the ventilators. He was applauded by cries and hand clapping and a rough sort of gaiety spread around. Soon even the last of the beetle-pounding stopped.

With full mouths, the washerwomen could only make gestures. It became so quiet that the grating sound of the fireman shoveling coal into the engine's firebox could be heard at regular intervals from far at the other end.

Gervaise was washing her colored things in the hot water thick with lather, which she had kept for that purpose. When she had finished, she drew a trestle towards her and hung across it all the different articles; the drippings from which made bluish puddles on the floor; and she commenced rinsing. Behind her, the cold water tap was set running into a vast tub fixed to the ground, and across which were two wooden bars whereon to lay the clothes. High up in the air were two other bars for the things to finish dripping on.

"We're almost finished, and not a bad job," said Madame Boche. "I'll wait and help you wring all that."

"Oh! it's not worth while; I'm much obliged though," replied the young woman, who was kneading with her hands and sousing the colored things in some clean water. "If I'd any sheets, it would be another thing."

But she had, however, to accept the concierge's assistance. They were wringing between them, one

each end, a woolen skirt of a washed-out chestnut color, from which dribbled a yellowish water, when Madame Boche exclaimed:

"Why, there's tall Virginie! What has she come here to wash, when all her wardrobe that isn't on her back would go into a pocket handkerchief?"

Gervaise jerked her head up. Virginie was a girl of her own age, taller than she was, dark and pretty in spite of her face being rather long and narrow. She had on an old black dress with flounces, and a red ribbon round her neck; and her hair was done up carefully, the chignon being enclosed in a blue silk net. She stood an instant in the middle of the central alley, screwing up her eyes as though seeking someone; then, when she caught sight of Gervaise, she passed close to her, erect, insolent, and with a swinging gait, and took a place in the same row, five tubs away from her.

"There's a freak for you!" continued Madame Boche in a lower tone of voice. "She never does any laundry, not even a pair of cuffs. A seamstress who doesn't even sew on a loose button! She's just like her sister, the brass burnisher, that hussy Adele, who stays away from her job two days out of three. Nobody knows who their folks are or how they make a living. Though, if I wanted to talk . . . What on earth is she scrubbing there? A filthy petticoat. I'll wager it's seen some lovely sights, that petticoat!"

Madame Boche was evidently trying to make herself agreeable to Gervaise. The truth was she often took a cup of coffee with Adele and Virginia, when the girls had any money. Gervaise did not answer but hurried over her work with feverish hands. She had just prepared her blue in a little tub that stood on three legs. She dipped in the linen things, and shook them an instant at the bottom of the colored water, the reflection of which had a pinky tinge; and after wringing them lightly, she spread them out on the wooden bars up above. During the time she was occupied with this work, she made a point of turning her back on Virginie. But she heard her chuckles; she could feel her sidelong glances. Virginie appeared only to have come there to provoke her. At one moment, Gervaise having turned around, they both stared into each other's faces.

"Leave her alone," whispered Madame Boche. "You're not going to pull each other's hair out, I hope. When I tell you there's nothing to it! It isn't her, anyhow!"

At this moment, as the young woman was hanging up the last article of clothing, there was a sound of laughter at the door of the wash-house.

"Here are two brats who want their mamma!" cried Charles.

All the women leant forward. Gervaise recognized Claude and Etienne. As soon as they caught sight of her, they ran to her through the puddles, the heels of their unlaced shoes resounding on the flagstones. Claude, the eldest, held his little brother by the hand. The women, as they passed them, uttered little exclamations of affection as they noticed their frightened though smiling faces. And they stood there in front of their mother, without leaving go of each other's hands, and holding their fair heads erect.

"Has papa sent you?" asked Gervaise.

But as she stooped to tie the laces of Etienne's shoes, she saw the key of their room on one of Claude's fingers, with the brass number hanging from it.

"Why, you've brought the key!" she said, greatly surprised. "What's that for?"

The child, seeing the key which he had forgotten on his finger, appeared to recollect, and exclaimed in his clear voice:

"Papa's gone away."

"He's gone to buy the lunch, and told you to come here to fetch me?"

Claude looked at his brother, hesitated, no longer recollecting. Then he resumed all in a breath: "Papa's gone away. He jumped off the bed, he put all the things in the trunk, he carried the trunk down to a cab. He's gone away."

Gervaise, who was squatting down, slowly rose to her feet, her face ghastly pale. She put her hands to her cheeks and temples, as though she felt her head was breaking; and she could find only these words which she repeated twenty times in the same tone of voice:

"Ah! good heavens!—ah! good heavens!—ah! good heavens!"

Madame Boche, however, also questioned the child, quite delighted at the chance of hearing the whole story.

"Come, little one, you must tell us just what happened. It was he who locked the door and who told you to bring the key, wasn't it?" And, lowering her voice, she whispered in Claude's ear: "Was there a lady in the cab?"

The child again got confused. Then he recommenced his story in a triumphant manner: "He jumped off the bed, he put all the things in the trunk. He's gone away."

Then, when Madame Boche let him go, he drew his brother in front of the tap, and they amused themselves by turning on the water. Gervaise was unable to cry. She was choking, leaning back against her tub, her face still buried in her hands. Brief shudders rocked her body and she wailed out long sighs while pressing her hands tighter against her eyes, as though abandoning herself to the blackness of desolation, a dark, deep pit into which she seemed to be falling.

"Come, my dear, pull yourself together!" murmured Madame Boche.

"If you only knew! If you only knew!" said she at length very faintly. "He sent me this morning to pawn my shawl and my chemises to pay for that cab."

And she burst out crying. The memory of the events of that morning and of her trip to the pawn-place woke from her the sobs that had been choking her throat. That abominable trip to the pawn-place was the thing that hurt most in all her sorrow and despair. Tears were streaming down her face but she didn't think of using her handkerchief.

"Be reasonable, do be quiet, everyone's looking at you," Madame Boche, who hovered round her, kept repeating. "How can you worry yourself so much on account of a man? You loved him, then, all the same, did you, my poor darling? A little while ago you were saying all sorts of things against him; and now you're crying for him, and almost breaking your heart. Dear me, how silly we all are!"

Then she became quite maternal.

"A pretty little woman like you! Can it be possible? One may tell you everything now, I suppose. Well! You recollect when I passed under your window, I already had my suspicions. Just fancy, last night, when Adele came home, I heard a man's footsteps with hers. So I thought I would see who was. I looked up the staircase. The fellow was already on the second landing; but I certainly recognized Monsieur Lantier's overcoat. Boche, who was on the watch this morning, saw him tranquilly nod adieu. He was with Adele, you know. Virginie has a situation now, where she goes twice a week. Only it's highly imprudent all the same, for they've only one room and an alcove, and can't very well say where Virginie managed to sleep."

She interrupted herself an instant, turned round, and then resumed, subduing her loud voice:

"She's laughing at seeing you cry, that heartless thing over there. I'd stake my life that her washing is all a pretence. She's packed off the other two, and she's come here so as to tell them how you take it."

Gervaise removed her hands from her face and looked. When she beheld Virginie in front of her amidst three or four women, speaking low and staring at her, she was seized with a mad rage. Her arms in front of her, searching the ground, she stumbled forward a few paces. Trembling all over, she found a bucket full of water, grabbed it with both hands, and emptied it at Virginie.

"The virago!" yelled tall Virginie.

She had stepped back, and her boots alone got wet. The other women, who for some minutes past had all been greatly upset by Gervaise's tears, jostled each other in their anxiety to see the fight. Some who were finishing their lunch, got on the tops of their tubs. Others hastened forward, their hands smothered with soap. A ring was formed.

"Ah! the virago!" repeated tall Virginie. "What's the matter with her? She's mad!"

Gervaise, standing on the defensive, her chin thrust out, her features convulsed, said nothing, not having yet acquired the Paris gift of street gab. The other continued:

"Get out! This girl's tired of wallowing about in the country; she wasn't twelve years old when the soldiers were at her. She even lost her leg serving her country. That leg's rotting off."

The lookers-on burst out laughing. Virginie, seeing her success, advanced a couple of steps, drawing herself up to her full height, and yelling louder than ever:

"Here! Come a bit nearer, just to see how I'll settle you! Don't you come annoying us here. Do I ever know her, the hussy? If she'd wetted me, I'd have pretty soon shown her battle, as you'd have seen. Let her just say what I've ever done to her. Speak, you vixen; what's been done to you?"

"Don't talk so much," stammered Gervaise. "You know well enough. Some one saw my husband last night. And shut up, because if you don't I'll most certainly strangle you."

"Her husband! That's a good one! As if cripples like her had husbands! If he's left you it's not my fault. Surely you don't think I've stolen him, do you? He was much too good for you and you made him sick. Did you keep him on a leash? Has anyone here seen her husband? There's a reward."

~~The laughter burst forth again. Gervaise contented herself with continually murmuring in a low tone of voice:~~

"You know well enough, you know well enough. It's your sister. I'll strangle her—your sister."

"Yes, go and try it on with my sister," resumed Virginie sneeringly. "Ah! it's my sister! That's very likely. My sister looks a trifle different to you; but what's that to me? Can't one come and wash one's clothes in peace now? Just dry up, d'ye hear, because I've had enough of it!"

But it was she who returned to the attack, after giving five or six strokes with her beetle, intoxicated by the insults she had been giving utterance to, and worked up into a passion. She left off and recommenced again, speaking in this way three times:

"Well, yes! it's my sister. There now, does that satisfy you? They adore each other. You should just see them bill and coo! And he's left you with your children. Those pretty kids with scabs all over their faces! You got one of them from a gendarme, didn't you? And you let three others die because you didn't want to pay excess baggage on your journey. It's your Lantier who told us that. Ah! he's been telling some fine things; he'd had enough of you!"

"You dirty jade! You dirty jade! You dirty jade!" yelled Gervaise, beside herself, and again seized with a furious trembling. She turned round, looking once more about the ground; and only observing the little tub, she seized hold of it by the legs, and flung the whole of the bluing at Virginie's face.

"The beast! She's spoilt my dress!" cried the latter, whose shoulder was sopping wet and whose left hand was dripping blue. "Just wait, you wretch!"

In her turn she seized a bucket, and emptied it over Gervaise. Then a formidable battle began. The two women both ran along the rows of tubs, seized hold of the pails that were full, and returned to dash the contents at each other's heads. And each deluge was accompanied by a volley of words. Gervaise answered herself now:

"There, you scum! You got it that time. It'll help to cool you."

"Ah! the carrion! That's for your filth. Wash yourself for once in your life."

"Yes, yes, I'll wash the salt out of you, you cod!"

"Another one! Brush your teeth, fix yourself up for your post to-night at the corner of the Rue de Belhomme."

They ended by having to refill the buckets at the water taps, continuing to insult each other the while. The initial bucketfuls were so poorly aimed as to scarcely reach their targets, but they soon began to splash each other in earnest. Virginie was the first to receive a bucketful in the face. The water ran down, soaking her back and front. She was still staggering when another caught her from the side, hitting her left ear and drenching her chignon which then came unwound into a limp, bedraggled string of hair.

Gervaise was hit first in the legs. One pail filled her shoes full of water and splashed up to her thighs.

Two more wet her even higher. Soon both of them were soaked from top to bottom and it was impossible to count the hits. Their clothes were plastered to their bodies and they looked shrunken. Water was dripping everywhere as from umbrellas in a rainstorm.

"They look jolly funny!" said the hoarse voice of one of the women.

Everyone in the wash-house was highly amused. A good space was left to the combatants, as nobody cared to get splashed. Applause and jokes circulated in the midst of the sluice-like noise of the buckets emptied in rapid succession! On the floor the puddles were running one into another, and the two women were wading in them up to their ankles. Virginie, however, who had been meditating a treacherous move, suddenly seized hold of a pail of lye, which one of her neighbors had left there and threw it. The same cry arose from all. Everyone thought Gervaise was scalded; but only her left foot had been slightly touched. And, exasperated by the pain, she seized a bucket, without troubling herself to fill it this time, and threw it with all her might at the legs of Virginie, who fell to the ground. As the women spoke together.

"She's broken one of her limbs!"

"Well, the other tried to cook her!"

"She's right, after all, the blonde one, if her man's been taken from her!"

Madame Boche held up her arms to heaven, uttering all sorts of exclamations. She had prudently retreated out of the way between two tubs; and the children, Claude and Etienne, crying, choking, terrified, clung to her dress with the continuous cry of "Mamma! Mamma!" broken by their sobs. When she saw Virginie fall she hastened forward, and tried to pull Gervaise away by her skin, repeating the while,

"Come now, go home! Be reasonable. On my word, it's quite upset me. Never was such a butcher seen before."

But she had to draw back and seek refuge again between the two tubs, with the children. Virginie had just flown at Gervaise's throat. She squeezed her round the neck, trying to strangle her. The latter freed herself with a violent jerk, and in her turn hung on to the other's hair, as though she was trying to pull her head off. The battle was silently resumed, without a cry, without an insult. They did not seize each other round the body, they attacked each other's faces with open hands and clawing fingers, pinching, scratching whatever they caught hold of. The tall, dark girl's red ribbon and blue silk hair net were torn off. The body of her dress, giving way at the neck, displayed a large portion of her shoulder, whilst the blonde, half stripped, a sleeve gone from her loose white jacket without her knowing how, had a rent in her underlinen, which exposed to view the naked line of her waist. Shreds of stuff flew in all directions. It was from Gervaise that the first blood was drawn, three long scratches from the mouth to the chin; and she sought to protect her eyes, shutting them at every grab the other made, for fear of having them torn out. No blood showed on Virginie as yet. Gervaise aimed at her ears, maddened at not being able to reach them. At length she succeeded in seizing hold of one of the earrings—an imitation pear in yellow glass—which she pulled out and slit the ear, and the blood flowed.

"They're killing each other! Separate them, the vixens!" exclaimed several voices.

The other women had drawn nearer. They formed themselves into two camps. Some were cheering the combatants on as the others were trembling and turning their heads away saying that it was making them sick. A large fight nearly broke out between the two camps as the women called each other names and brandished their fists threateningly. Three loud slaps rang out.

Madame Boche, meanwhile, was trying to discover the wash-house boy.

"Charles! Charles! Wherever has he got to?"

And she found him in the front rank, looking on with his arms folded. He was a big fellow, with an enormous neck. He was laughing and enjoying the sight of the skin which the two women displayed. The little blonde was as fat as a quail. It would be fun if her chemise burst open.

"Why," murmured he, blinking his eye, "she's got a strawberry birthmark under her arm."

"What! You're there!" cried Madame Boche, as she caught sight of him. "Just come and help us separate them. You can easily separate them, you can!"

"Oh, no! thank you, not if I know it," said he coolly. "To get my eye scratched like I did the other day, I suppose! I'm not here for that sort of thing; I have enough to do without that. Don't be afraid, a little bleeding does 'em good; it'll soften 'em."

The concierge then talked of fetching the police; but the mistress of the wash-house, the delicate young woman with the red, inflamed eyes, would not allow her to do this. She kept saying:

"No, no, I won't; it'll compromise my establishment."

The struggle on the ground continued. All on a sudden, Virginie raised herself up on her knees. She had just gotten hold of a beetle and held it on high. She had a rattle in her throat and in an altered voice, she exclaimed,

"Here's something that'll settle you! Get your dirty linen ready!"

Gervaise quickly thrust out her hand, and also seized a beetle, and held it up like a club; and she too spoke in a choking voice,

"Ah! you want to wash. Let me get hold of your skin that I may beat it into dish-cloths!"

For a moment they remained there, on their knees, menacing each other. Their hair all over their faces, their breasts heaving, muddy, swelling with rage, they watched one another, as they waited and took breath. Gervaise gave the first blow. Her beetle glided off Virginie's shoulder, and she at once threw herself on one side to avoid the latter's beetle, which grazed her hip. Then, warming to their work they struck at each other like washerwomen beating clothes, roughly, and in time. Whenever there was a hit, the sound was deadened, so that one might have thought it a blow in a tub full of water. The other women around them no longer laughed. Several had gone off saying that it quite upset them; those who remained stretched out their necks, their eyes lighted up with a gleam of cruelty, admiring the pluck displayed. Madame Boche had led Claude and Etienne away, and one could hear at the other end of the building the sound of their sobs, mingled with the sonorous shocks of the two beetles. But Gervaise suddenly yelled. Virginie had caught her a whack with all her might on her bare arm, ju

above the elbow. A large red mark appeared, the flesh at once began to swell. Then she threw herself upon Virginie, and everyone thought she was going to beat her to death.

"Enough! Enough!" was cried on all sides.

Her face bore such a terrible expression, that no one dared approach her. Her strength seemed to have increased tenfold. She seized Virginie round the waist, bent her down and pressed her face against the flagstones. Raising her beetle she commenced beating as she used to beat at Plassans, on the banks of the Viorne, when her mistress washed the clothes of the garrison. The wood seemed to yield to the flesh with a damp sound. At each whack a red weal marked the white skin.

"Oh, oh!" exclaimed the boy Charles, opening his eyes to their full extent and gloating over the sight.

Laughter again burst forth from the lookers-on, but soon the cry, "Enough! Enough!" recommenced. Gervaise heard not, neither did she tire. She examined her work, bent over it, anxious not to leave a dry place. She wanted to see the whole of that skin beaten, covered with contusions. And she talked and seized with a ferocious gaiety, recalling a washerwoman's song,

"Bang! Bang! Margot at her tub.
Bang! Bang! Beating rub-a-dub.
Bang! Bang! Tries to wash her heart.
Bang! Bang! Black with grief to part."

And then she resumed,

"That's for you, that's for your sister.
That's for Lantier.
When you next see them,
You can give them that.
Attention! I'm going to begin again.
That's for Lantier, that's for your sister.
That's for you.
Bang! Bang! Margot at her tub.
Bang! Bang! Beating rub-a-dub—"

The others were obliged to drag Virginie away from her. The tall, dark girl, her face bathed in tears and purple with shame, picked up her things and hastened away. She was vanquished. Gervaise slipped on the sleeve of her jacket again, and fastened up her petticoats. Her arm pained her a good deal, and she asked Madame Boche to place her bundle of clothes on her shoulder. The concierge referred to the battle, spoke of her emotions, and talked of examining the young woman's person, just to see.

"You may, perhaps, have something broken. I heard a tremendous blow."

But Gervaise wanted to go home. She made no reply to the pitying remarks and noisy ovation of the other women who surrounded her, erect in their aprons. When she was laden she gained the door where the children awaited her.

"Two hours, that makes two sous," said the mistress of the wash-house, already back at her post in the

glazed closet.

Why two sous? She no longer understood that she was asked to pay for her place there. Then she gave the two sous; and limping very much beneath the weight of the wet clothes on her shoulder, the water dripping from off her, her elbow black and blue, her cheek covered with blood, she went off, dragging Claude and Etienne with her bare arms, whilst they trotted along on either side of her, still trembling and their faces besmeared with their tears.

Once she was gone, the wash-house resumed its roaring tumult. The washerwomen had eaten their bread and drunk their wine. Their faces were lit up and their spirits enlivened by the fight between Gervaise and Virginie.

The long lines of tubs were astir again with the fury of thrashing arms, of craggy profiles, of marionettes with bent backs and slumping shoulders that twisted and jerked violently as though on hinges. Conversations went on from one end to the other in loud voices. Laughter and coarse remarks crackled through the ceaseless gurgling of the water. Faucets were sputtering, buckets spilling rivulets flowing underneath the rows of washboards. Throughout the huge shed rising wisps of steam reflected a reddish tint, pierced here and there by disks of sunlight, golden globes that had leaked through holes in the awnings. The air was stiflingly warm and odorous with soap.

Suddenly the hall was filled with a white mist. The huge copper lid of the lye-water kettle was rising mechanically along a notched shaft, and from the gaping copper hollow within its wall of bricks came whirling clouds of vapor. Meanwhile, at one side the drying machines were hard at work; within the cast-iron cylinders bundles of laundry were being wrung dry by the centrifugal force of the steam engine, which was still puffing, steaming, jolting the wash-house with the ceaseless labor of its iron limbs.

When Gervaise turned into the entry of the Hotel Boncoeur, her tears again mastered her. It was a dark, narrow passage, with a gutter for the dirty water running alongside the wall; and the stenches which she again encountered there caused her to think of the fortnight she had passed in the place with Lantier—a fortnight of misery and quarrels, the recollection of which was now a bitter regret. It seemed to bring her abandonment home to her.

Upstairs the room was bare, in spite of the sunshine which entered through the open window. The blaze of light, that kind of dancing golden dust, exposed the lamentable condition of the blackened ceiling, and of the walls half denuded of paper, all the more. The only thing left hanging in the room was a woman's small neckerchief, twisted like a piece of string. The children's bedstead, drawn in the middle of the apartment, displayed the chest of drawers, the open drawers of which exposed the emptiness. Lantier had washed himself and had used up the last of the pomatum—two sous' worth of pomatum in a playing card; the greasy water from his hands filled the basin. And he had forgotten nothing. The corner which until then had been filled by the trunk seemed to Gervaise an immense empty space. Even the little mirror which hung on the window-fastening was gone. When she made this discovery, she had a presentiment. She looked on the mantel-piece. Lantier had taken away the pawn tickets; the pink bundle was no longer there, between the two odd zinc candlesticks.

She hung her laundry over the back of a chair and just stood there, gazing around at the furniture. She was so dulled and bewildered that she could no longer cry. She had only one sou left. Then, hearing Claude and Etienne laughing merrily by the window, their troubles already forgotten, she went to the

and put her arms about them, losing herself for a moment in contemplation of that long gray avenue where, that very morning, she had watched the awakening of the working population, of the immense work-shop of Paris.

At this hour immense heat was rising from the pavement and from all the furnaces in the factories setting alight a reflecting oven over the city and beyond the octroi wall. Out upon this very pavement into this furnace blast, she had been tossed, alone with her little ones. As she glanced up and down the boulevard, she was seized with a dull dread that her life would be fixed there forever, between slaughter-house and a hospital.

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