

L'Assommoir

by

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CHAPTER I.....	3
CHAPTER II.....	26
CHAPTER III.....	47
CHAPTER IV.....	71
CHAPTER V.....	96
CHAPTER VI.....	120
CHAPTER VII.....	143
CHAPTER VIII.....	171
CHAPTER IX.....	198
CHAPTER X.....	224
CHAPTER XI.....	248
CHAPTER XII.....	274
CHAPTER XIII.....	297

CHAPTER I

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 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 to 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's awakening already filled the air. Craning her neck to look at the Poissonniere gate, she remained for a 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 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 smear 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 drinks, 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 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 of 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 vacantly 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 heavens 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 of 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 Provencal 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 La 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 Boche intends to give them notice, she and her long stick of a sister, because they've always a string of men after them on the staircase."

Lantier raised his fists; then, resisting the desire of striking her, he seized hold of her by the arms, 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 up and dressed 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 a 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! It 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

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