



ÉMILE ZOLA

GERMINAL

HISTORICAL NOVEL

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Part 1

Chapter 1

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OVER the open plain, beneath a starless sky as dark and thick as ink, a man walked alone along the highway from Marchiennes to Montsou, a straight paved road ten kilometres in length, intersecting the beetroot-fields. He could not even see the black soil before him, and only felt the immense flat horizon by the gusts of March wind, squalls as strong as on the sea, and frozen from sweeping leagues of marsh and naked earth. No tree could be seen against the sky, and the road unrolled as straight as a pier in the midst of the blinding spray of darkness.

The man had set out from Marchiennes about two o'clock. He walked with long strides, shivering beneath his worn cotton jacket and corduroy breeches. A small parcel tied in a check handkerchief troubled him much, and he pressed it against his side, sometimes with one elbow, sometimes with the other, so that he could slip to the bottom of his pockets both the benumbed hands that bled beneath the lashes of the wind. A single idea occupied his head — the empty head of a workman without work and without lodging — the hope that the cold would be less keen after sunrise. For an hour he went on thus, when on the left, two kilometres from Montsou, he saw red flames, three fires burning in the open air and apparently suspended. At first

he hesitated, half afraid. Then he could not resist the painful need to warm his hands for a moment.

The steep road led downwards, and everything disappeared. The man saw on his right a paling, a wall of coarse planks shutting in a line of rails, while a grassy slope rose on the left surmounted by confused gables, a vision of a village with low uniform roofs. He went on some two hundred paces. Suddenly, at a bend in the road, the fires reappeared close to him, though he could not understand how they burnt so high in the dead sky, like smoky moons. But on the level soil another sight had struck him. It was a heavy mass, a low pile of buildings from which rose the silhouette of a factory chimney; occasional gleams appeared from dirty windows, five or six melancholy lanterns were hung outside to frames of blackened wood, which vaguely outlined the profiles of gigantic stages; and from this fantastic apparition, drowned in night and smoke, a single voice arose, the thick, long breathing of a steam escapement that could not be seen.

Then the man recognized a pit. His despair returned. What was the good? There would be no work. Instead of turning towards the buildings he decided at last to ascend the pit bank, on which burnt in iron baskets the three coal fires which gave light and warmth for work. The labourers in the cutting must have been working late; they were still throwing out the useless rubbish. Now he heard the landers push the wagons on the stages. He could distinguish living shadows tipping over the trains or tubs near each fire.

“Good day,” he said, approaching one of the baskets. Turning his back to the fire, the carman stood upright. He

was an old man, dressed in knitted violet wool with a rabbit-skin cap on his head; while his horse, a great yellow horse, waited with the immobility of stone while they emptied the six trains he drew. The workman employed at the tipping-cradle, a red-haired lean fellow, did not hurry himself; he pressed on the lever with a sleepy hand. And above, the wind grew stronger — an icy north wind — and its great, regular breaths passed by like the strokes of a scythe.

“Good day,” replied the old man. There was silence. The man, who felt that he was being looked at suspiciously, at once told his name.

“I am called Étienne Lantier. I am an engine-man. Any work here?”

The flames lit him up. He might be about twenty-one years of age, a very dark, handsome man, who looked strong in spite of his thin limbs.

The carman, thus reassured, shook his head.

“Work for an engine-man? No, no! There were two came yesterday. There’s nothing.”

A gust cut short their speech. Then Étienne asked, pointing to the sombre pile of buildings at the foot of the platform:

“A pit, isn’t it?”

The old man this time could not reply: he was strangled by a violent cough. At last he expectorated, and his expectoration left a black patch on the purple soil.

“Yes, a pit. The Voreux. There! The settlement is quite near.”

In his turn, and with extended arm, he pointed out in the night the village of which the young man had vaguely seen

the roofs. But the six trams were empty, and he followed them without cracking his whip, his legs stiffened by rheumatism; while the great yellow horse went on of itself, pulling heavily between the rails beneath a new gust which bristled its coat.

The Voreux was now emerging from the gloom. Étienne, who forgot himself before the stove, warming his poor bleeding hands, looked round and could see each part of the pit: the shed tarred with siftings, the pit-frame, the vast chamber of the winding machine, the square turret of the exhaustion pump. This pit, piled up in the bottom of a hollow, with its squat brick buildings, raising its chimney like a threatening horn, seemed to him to have the evil air of a gluttonous beast crouching there to devour the earth. While examining it, he thought of himself, of his vagabond existence these eight days he had been seeking work. He saw himself again at his workshop at the railway, delivering a blow at his foreman, driven from Lille, driven from everywhere. On Saturday he had arrived at Marchinnes, where they said that work was to be had at the Forges, and there was nothing, neither at the Forges nor at Sonnevillè's. He had been obliged to pass the Sunday hidden beneath the wood of a cartwright's yard, from which the watchman had just turned him out at two o'clock in the morning. He had nothing, not a penny, not even a crust; what should he do, wandering along the roads without aim, not knowing where to shelter himself from the wind? Yes, it was certainly a pit; the occasional lanterns lighted up the square; a door, suddenly opened, had enabled him to catch sight of the furnaces in a clear light. He could explain even the

escapement of the pump, that thick, long breathing that went on without ceasing, and which seemed to be the monster's congested respiration.

The workman, expanding his back at the tipping-cradle, had not even lifted his eyes on Étienne, and the latter was about to pick up his little bundle, which had fallen to the earth, when a spasm of coughing announced the carman's return. Slowly he emerged from the darkness, followed by the yellow horse drawing six more laden trams.

"Are there factories at Montsou?" asked the young man.

The old man expectorated, then replied in the wind:

"Oh, it isn't factories that are lacking. Should have seen it three or four years ago. Everything was roaring then. There were not men enough; there never were such wages. And now they are tightening their bellies again. Nothing but misery in the country; every one is being sent away; workshops closing one after the other. It is not the emperor's fault, perhaps; but why should he go and fight in America? without counting that the beasts are dying from cholera, like the people."

Then, in short sentences and with broken breath, the two continued to complain. Étienne narrated his vain wanderings of the past week: must one, then, die of hunger? Soon the roads would be full of beggars.

"Yes," said the old man, "this will turn out badly, for God does not allow so many Christians to be thrown on the street."

"We don't have meat every day."

"But if one had bread!"

"True, if one only had bread."

Their voices were lost, gusts of wind carrying away the words in a melancholy howl.

“Here!” began the carman again very loudly, turning towards the south. “Montsou is over there.”

And stretching out his hand again he pointed out invisible spots in the darkness as he named them. Below, at Montsou, the Fauvelle sugar works were still going, but the Hoton sugar works had just been dismissing hands; there were only the Dutilleul flour mill and the Bleuze rope walk for mine-cables which kept up. Then, with a large gesture he indicated the north half of the horizon: the Sonneviller workshops had not received two-thirds of their usual orders; only two of the three blast furnaces of the Marchiennes Forges were alight; finally, at the Gagebois glass works a strike was threatening, for there was talk of a reduction of wages.

“I know, I know,” replied the young man at each indication. “I have been there.”

“With us here things are going on at present,” added the carman; “but the pits have lowered their output. And see opposite, at the Victoire, there are also only two batteries of coke furnaces alight.”

He expectorated, and set out behind his sleepy horse, after harnessing it to the empty trams.

Now Étienne could oversee the entire country. The darkness remained profound, but the old man’s hand had, as it were, filled it with great miseries, which the young man unconsciously felt at this moment around him everywhere in the limitless tract. Was it not a cry of famine that the March wind rolled up across this naked plain? The squalls were

furious: they seemed to bring the death of labour, a famine which would kill many men. And with wandering eyes he tried to pierce shades, tormented at once by the desire and by the fear of seeing. Everything was hidden in the unknown depths of the gloomy night. He only perceived, very far off, the blast furnaces and the coke ovens. The latter, with their hundreds of chimneys, planted obliquely, made lines of red flame; while the two towers, more to the left, burnt blue against the blank sky, like giant torches. It resembled a melancholy conflagration. No other stars rose on the threatening horizon except these nocturnal fires in a land of coal and iron.

“You belong to Belgium, perhaps?” began again the carman, who had returned behind Étienne.

This time he only brought three trams. Those at least could be tipped over; an accident which had happened to the cage, a broken screw nut, would stop work for a good quarter of an hour. At the bottom of the pit bank there was silence; the landers no longer shook the stages with a prolonged vibration. One only heard from the pit the distant sound of a hammer tapping on an iron plate.

“No, I come from the South,” replied the young man.

The workman, after having emptied the trains, had seated himself on the earth, glad of the accident, maintaining his savage silence; he had simply lifted his large, dim eyes to the carman, as if annoyed by so many words. The latter, indeed, did not usually talk at such length. The unknown man’s face must have pleased him that he should have been taken by one of these itchings for

confidence which sometimes make old people talk aloud even when alone.

"I belong to Montsou," he said, "I am called Bonnemort."

"Is it a nickname?" asked Étienne, astonished.

The old man made a grimace of satisfaction and pointed to the Voreux:

"Yes, yes; they have pulled me three times out of that, torn to pieces, once with all my hair scorched, once with my gizzard full of earth, and another time with my belly swollen with water, like a frog. And then, when they saw that nothing would kill me, they called me Bonnemort for a joke."

His cheerfulness increased, like the creaking of an ill-greased pulley, and ended by degenerating into a terrible spasm of coughing. The fire basket now clearly lit up his large head, with its scanty white hair and flat, livid face, spotted with bluish patches. He was short, with an enormous neck, projecting calves and heels, and long arms, with massive hands falling to his knees. For the rest, like his horse, which stood immovable, without suffering from the wind, he seemed to be made of stone; he had no appearance of feeling either the cold or the gusts that whistled at his ears. When he coughed his throat was torn by a deep rasping; he spat at the foot of the basket and the earth was blackened.

Étienne looked at him and at the ground which he had thus stained.

"Have you been working long at the mine?"

Bonnemort flung open both arms.

"Long? I should think so. I was not eight when I went down into the Voreux and I am now fifty-eight. Reckon that

up! I have been everything down there; at first trammer, then putter, when I had the strength to wheel, then pikeman for eighteen years. Then, because of my cursed legs, they put me into the earth cutting, to bank up and patch, until they had to bring me up, because the doctor said I should stay there for good. Then, after five years of that, they made me carman. Eh? that's fine — fifty years at the mine, forty-five down below."

While he was speaking, fragments of burning coal, which now and then fell from the basket, lit up his pale face with their red reflection.

"They tell me to rest," he went on, "but I'm not going to; I'm not such a fool. I can get on for two years longer, to my sixtieth, so as to get the pension of one hundred and eighty francs. If I wished them good evening to-day they would give me a hundred and fifty at once. They are cunning, the beggars. Besides, I am sound, except my legs. You see, it's the water which has got under my skin through being always wet in the cuttings. There are days when I can't move a paw without screaming."

A spasm of coughing interrupted him again.

"And that makes you cough so," said Étienne.

But he vigorously shook his head. Then, when he could speak:

"No, no! I caught cold a month ago. I never used to cough; now I can't get rid of it. And the queer thing is that I spit, that I spit ——"

The rasping was again heard in his throat, followed by the black expectoration.

“Is it blood?” asked Étienne, at last venturing to question him.

Bonnemort slowly wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

“It’s coal. I’ve got enough in my carcass to warm me till I die. And it’s five years since I put a foot down below. I stored it up, it seems, without knowing it; it keeps you alive!”

There was silence. The distant hammer struck regular blows in the pit, and the wind passed by with its moan, like a cry of hunger and weariness coming out of the depths of the night. Before the flames which grew low, the old man went on in lower tones, chewing over again his old recollections. Ah, certainly: it was not yesterday that he and his began hammering at the seam. The family had worked for the Montsou Mining Company since it started, and that was long ago, a hundred and six years already. His grandfather, Guillaume Maheu, an urchin of fifteen then, had found the rich coal at Réquillart, the Company’s first pit, an old abandoned pit to-day down below near the Fauvelle sugar works. All the country knew it, and as a proof, the discovered seam was called the Guillaume, after his grandfather. He had not known him — a big fellow, it was said, very strong, who died of old age at sixty. Then his father, Nicolas Maheu, called Le Rouge, when hardly forty years of age had died in the pit, which was being excavated at that time: a land-slip, a complete slide, and the rock drank his blood and swallowed his bones. Two of his uncles and his three brothers, later on, also left their skins there. He, Vincent Maheu, who had come out almost whole, except that his legs were rather shaky, was looked upon as a

knowing fellow. But what could one do? One must work; one worked here from father to son, as one would work at anything else. His son, Toussaint Maheu, was being worked to death there now, and his grandsons, and all his people, who lived opposite in the settlement. A hundred and six years of mining, the youngsters after the old ones, for the same master. Eh? there were many bourgeois that could not give their history so well!

“Anyhow, when one has got enough to eat!” murmured Étienne again.

“That is what I say. As long as one has bread to eat one can live.”

Bonnemort was silent; and his eyes turned towards the settlement, where lights were appearing one by one. Four o'clock struck in the Montsou tower and the cold became keener.

“And is your company rich?” asked Étienne.

The old man shrugged his shoulders, and then let them fall as if overwhelmed beneath an avalanche of gold.

“Ah, yes! Ah, yes! Not perhaps so rich as its neighbour, the Anzin Company. But millions and millions all the same. They can't count it. Nineteen pits, thirteen at work, the Voreux, the Victoire, Crévecoeur, Mirou, St. Thomas, Madeleine, Feutry-Cantel, and still more, and six for pumping or ventilation, like Réquillart. Ten thousand workers, concessions reaching over sixty-seven communes, an output of five thousand tons a day, a railway joining all the pits, and workshops, and factories! Ah, yes! ah, yes! there's money there!”

The rolling of trains on the stages made the big yellow horse prick his ears. The cage was evidently repaired below, and the landers had got to work again. While he was harnessing his beast to re-descend, the carman added gently, addressing himself to the horse:

“Won’t do to chatter, lazy good-for-nothing! If Monsieur Hennebeau knew how you waste your time!”

Étienne looked thoughtfully into the night. He asked:

“Then Monsieur Hennebeau owns the mine?”

“No,” explained the old man, “Monsieur Hennebeau is only the general manager; he is paid just the same as us.”

With a gesture the young man pointed into the darkness.

“Who does it all belong to, then?”

But Bonnemort was for a moment so suffocated by a new and violent spasm that he could not get his breath. Then, when he had expectorated and wiped the black froth from his lips, he replied in the rising wind:

“Eh? all that belongs to? Nobody knows. To people.” And with his hand he pointed in the darkness to a vague spot, an unknown and remote place, inhabited by those people for whom the Maheus had been hammering at the seam for more than a century. His voice assumed a tone of religious awe; it was as if he were speaking of an inaccessible tabernacle containing a sated and crouching god to whom they had given all their flesh and whom they had never seen.

“At all events, if one can get enough bread to eat,” repeated Étienne, for the third time, without any apparent transition.

“Indeed, yes; if we could always get bread, it would be too good.”

The horse had started; the carman, in his turn, disappeared, with the trailing step of an invalid. Near the tipping-cradle the workman had not stirred, gathered up in a ball, burying his chin between his knees, with his great dim eyes fixed on emptiness.

When he had picked up his bundle, Étienne still remained at the same spot. He felt the gusts freezing his back, while his chest was burning before the large fire. Perhaps, all the same, it would be as well to inquire at the pit, the old man might not know. Then he resigned himself; he would accept any work. Where should he go, and what was to become of him in this country famished for lack of work? Must he leave his carcass behind a wall, like a strayed dog? But one doubt troubled him, a fear of the Voreux in the middle of this flat plain, drowned in so thick a night. At every gust the wind seemed to rise as if it blew from an ever-broadening horizon. No dawn whitened the dead sky. The blast furnaces alone flamed, and the coke ovens, making the darkness redder without illuminating the unknown. And the Voreux, at the bottom of its hole, with its posture as of an evil beast, continued to crunch, breathing with a heavier and slower respiration, troubled by its painful digestion of human flesh.

Chapter 2

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IN the middle of the fields of wheat and beetroot, the Deux-Cent-Quarante settlement slept beneath the black night. One could vaguely distinguish four immense blocks of small houses, back to back, barracks or hospital blocks, geometric and parallel, separated by three large avenues which were divided into gardens of equal size. And over the desert plain one heard only the moan of squalls through the broken trellises of the enclosures.

In the Maheus' house, No. 16 in the second block, nothing was stirring. The single room that occupied the first floor was drowned in a thick darkness which seemed to overwhelm with its weight the sleep of the beings whom one felt to be there in a mass, with open mouths, overcome by weariness. In spite of the keen cold outside, there was a living heat in the heavy air, that hot stuffiness of even the best kept bedrooms, the smell of human cattle.

Four o'clock had struck from the clock in the room on the ground floor, but nothing yet stirred; one heard the piping of slender respirations, accompanied by two series of sonorous snores. And suddenly Catherine got up. In her weariness she had, as usual, counted the four strokes through the floor without the strength to arouse herself completely. Then, throwing her legs from under the bedclothes, she felt about, at last struck a match and lighted the candle. But she remained seated, her head so heavy that it fell back between her shoulders, seeking to return to the bolster.

Now the candle lighted up the room, a square room with two windows, and filled with three beds. There could be seen a cupboard, a table, and two old walnut chairs, whose smoky tone made hard, dark patches against the walls, which were painted a light yellow. And nothing else, only clothes hung to nails, a jug placed on the floor, and a red pan which served as a basin. In the bed on the left, Zacharie, the eldest, a youth of one-and-twenty, was asleep with his brother Jeanlin, who had completed his eleventh year; in the right-hand bed two urchins, Lénore and Henri, the first six years old, the second four, slept in each other's arms, while Catherine shared the third bed with her sister Alzire, so small for her nine years that Catherine would not have felt her near her if it were not for the little invalid's humpback, which pressed into her side. The glass door was open; one could perceive the lobby of a landing, a sort of recess in which the father and the mother occupied a fourth bed, against which they had been obliged to install the cradle of the latest coiner, Estelle, aged scarcely three months.

However, Catherine made a desperate effort. She stretched herself, she fidgeted her two hands in the red hair which covered her forehead and neck. Slender for her fifteen years, all that showed of her limbs outside the narrow sheath of her chemise were her bluish feet, as it were tattooed with coal, and her slight arms, the milky whiteness of which contrasted with the sallow tint of her face, already spoilt by constant washing with black soap. A final yawn opened her rather large mouth with splendid teeth against the chlorotic pallor of her gums; while her grey

eyes were crying in her fight with sleep, with a look of painful distress and weariness which seemed to spread over the whole of her naked body.

But a growl came from the landing, and Maheu's thick voice stammered;

"Devil take it! It's time. Is it you lighting up, Catherine?"

"Yes, father; it has just struck downstairs."

"Quick then, lazy. If you had danced less on Sunday you would have woke us earlier. A fine lazy life!"

And he went on grumbling, but sleep returned to him also. His reproaches became confused, and were extinguished in fresh snoring.

The young girl, in her chemise, with her naked feet on the floor, moved about in the room. As she passed by the bed of Henri and L  nore, she replaced the coverlet which had slipped down. They did not wake, lost in the strong sleep of childhood. Alzire, with open eyes, had turned to take the warm place of her big sister without speaking.

"I say, now, Zacharie — and you, Jeanlin; I say, now!" repeated Catherine, standing before her two brothers, who were still wallowing with their noses in the bolster.

She had to seize the elder by the shoulder and shake him; then, while he was muttering abuse, it came into her head to uncover them by snatching away the sheet. That seemed funny to her, and she began to laugh when she saw the two boys struggling with naked legs.

"Stupid, leave me alone," growled Zacharie in ill-temper, sitting up. "I don't like tricks. Good Lord! Say it's time to get up?"

He was lean and ill-made, with a long face and a chin which showed signs of a sprouting beard, yellow hair, and the anaemic pallor which belonged to his whole family.

His shirt had rolled up to his belly, and he lowered it, not from modesty but because he was not warm.

“It has struck downstairs,” repeated Catherine; ““come! up! father’s angry.”

Jeanlin, who had rolled himself up, closed his eyes, saying: “Go and hang yourself; I’m going to sleep.”

She laughed again, the laugh of a good-natured girl. He was so small, his limbs so thin, with enormous joints, enlarged by scrofula, that she took him up in her arms. But he kicked about, his apish face, pale and wrinkled, with its green eyes and great ears, grew pale with the rage of weakness. He said nothing, he bit her right breast.

“Beastly fellow!” she murmured, keeping back a cry and putting him on the floor.

Alzire was silent, with the sheet tucked under her chin, but she had not gone to sleep again. With her intelligent invalid’s eyes she followed her sister and her two brothers, who were now dressing. Another quarrel broke out around the pan, the boys hustled the young girl because she was so long washing herself. Shirts flew about: and, while still half-asleep, they eased themselves without shame, with the tranquil satisfaction of a litter of puppies that have grown up together. Catherine was ready first. She put on her miner’s breeches, then her canvas jacket, and fastened the blue cap on her knotted hair; in these clean Monday clothes she had the appearance of a little man; nothing remained to indicate her sex except the slight roll of her hips.

“When the old man comes back,” said Zacharie, mischievously, “he’ll like to find the bed unmade. You know I shall tell him it’s you.”

The old man was the grandfather, Bonneinort, who, as he worked during the night, slept by day, so that the bed was never cold; there was always someone snoring there. Without replying, Catherine set herself to arrange the bed-clothes and tuck them in. But during the last moments sounds had been heard behind the wall in the next house. These brick buildings, economically put up by the Company, were so thin that the least breath could be heard through them. The inmates lived there, elbow to elbow, from one end to the other; and no fact of family life remained hidden, even from the youngsters. A heavy step had tramped up the staircase; then there was a kind of soft fall, followed by a sigh of satisfaction.

“Good!” said Catherine. “Levaque has gone down, and here is Bouteloup come to join the Levaque woman.”

Jeanlin grinned; even Alzire’s eyes shone. Every morning they made fun of the household of three next door, a pikeman who lodged a worker in the cutting, an arrangement which gave the woman two men, one by night, the other by day.

“Philoméne is coughing,” began Catherine again, after listening.

She was speaking of the eldest Levaque, a big girl of nineteen, and the mistress of Zacharie, by whom she had already had two children; her chest was so delicate that she was only a sifter at the pit, never having been able to work below.

“Pooh! Philoméne!” replied Zacharie, “she cares a lot, she’s asleep. It’s hoggish to sleep till six.”

He was putting on his breeches when an idea occurred to him, and he opened the window. Outside in the darkness the settlement was awaking, lights were dawning one by one between the laths of the shutters. And there was another dispute: he leant out to watch if he could not see, coming out of Pierron’s opposite, the captain of the Voreux, who was accused of sleeping with the Pierron woman, while his sister called to him that since the day before the husband had taken day duty at the pit-eye, and that certainly Dansaert could not have slept there that night. Whilst the air entered in icy whiffs, both of them, becoming angry, maintained the truth of their own information, until cries and tears broke out. It was Éstelle, in her cradle, vexed by the cold.

Maheu woke up suddenly. What had he got in his bones, then? Here he was going to sleep again like a good-for-nothing. And he swore so vigorously that the children became still. Zacharie and Jeanlin finished washing with slow weariness. Alzire, with her large, open eyes, continually stared. The two youngsters, Lénore and Henri, in each other’s arms, had not stirred, breathing in the same quiet way in spite of the noise.

“Catherine, give me the candle,” called out Maheu.

She finished buttoning her jacket, and carried the candle into the closet, leaving her brothers to look for their clothes by what light came through the door. Her father jumped out of bed. She did not stop, but went downstairs in her coarse woollen stockings, feeling her way, and lighted another

candle in the parlour, to prepare the coffee. All the sabots of the family were beneath the sideboard.

“Will you be still, vermin?” began Maheu, again, exasperated by Éstelle’s cries which still went on.

He was short, like old Bonnemort, and resembled him, with his strong head, his flat, livid face, beneath yellow hair cut very short. The child screamed more than ever, frightened by those great knotted arms which were held above her.

“Leave her alone; you know that she won’t be still,” said his wife, stretching herself in the middle of the bed.

She also had just awakened and was complaining how disgusting it was never to be able to finish the night. Could they not go away quietly? Buried in the clothes she only showed her long face with large features of a heavy beauty, already disfigured at thirty-nine by her life of wretchedness and the seven children she had borne. With her eyes on the ceiling she spoke slowly, while her man dressed himself. They both ceased to hear the little one, who was strangling herself with screaming.

“Eh? You know I haven’t a penny and this is only Monday: still six days before the fortnight’s out. This can’t go on. You, all of you, only bring in nine francs. How do you expect me to go on? We are ten in the house.”

“Oh! nine francs!” exclaimed Maheu. “I and Zacharie three: that makes six, Catherine and the father, two: that makes four: four and six, ten, and Jeanlin one, that makes eleven.”

“Yes, eleven, but there are Sundays and the off-days. Never more than nine, you know.”

He did not reply, being occupied in looking on the ground for his leather belt. Then he said, on getting up:

“Mustn’t complain. I am sound all the same. There’s more than one at forty-two who are put to the patching.”

“Maybe, old man, but that does not give us bread. Where am I to get it from, eh? Have you got nothing?”

“I’ve got two coppers.”

“Keep them for a half-pint. Good Lord! where am I to get it from? Six days! it will never end. We owe sixty francs to Maigrat, who turned me out of doors day before yesterday. That won’t prevent me from going to see him again. But if he goes on refusing ——”

And Maheude continued in her melancholy voice, without moving her head, only closing her eyes now and then beneath the dim light of the candle. She said the cupboard was empty, the little ones asking for bread and butter, even the coffee was done, and the water caused colic, and the long days passed in deceiving hunger with boiled cabbage leaves. Little by little she had been obliged to raise her voice, for Estelle’s screams drowned her words. These cries became unbearable. Maheu seemed all at once to hear them, and, in a fury, snatched the little one up from the cradle and threw it on the mother’s bed, stammering with rage:

“Here, take her; I’ll do for her! Damn the child! It wants for nothing: it sucks, and it complains louder than all the rest!”

Estelle began, in fact, to suck. Hidden beneath the clothes and soothed by the warmth of the bed, her cries subsided into the greedy little sound of her lips.

“Haven’t the Piolaine people told you to go and see them?” asked the father, after a period of silence.

The mother bit her lip with an air of discouraged doubt.

“Yes, they met me; they were carrying clothes for poor children. Yes, I’ll take Lénore and Henri to them this morning. If they only give me a few pence!”

There was silence again.

Maheu was ready. He remained a moment motionless, then added, in his hollow voice:

“What is it that you want? Let things be, and see about the soup. It’s no good talking, better be at work down below.”

“True enough,” replied Maheude. “Blow out the candle: I don’t need to see the colour of my thoughts.”

He blew out the candle. Zacharie and Jeanlin were already going down; he followed them, and the wooden staircase creaked beneath their heavy feet, clad in wool. Behind them the closet and the room were again dark. The children slept; even Alzire’s eyelids were closed; but the mother now remained with her eyes open in the darkness, while, pulling at her breast, the pendent breast of an exhausted woman, Estelle was purring like a kitten.

Down below, Catherine had at first occupied herself with the fire, which was burning in the iron grate, flanked by two ovens. The Company distributed every month, to each family, eight hectolitres of a hard slaty coal, gathered in the passages. It burnt slowly, and the young girl, who piled up the fire every night, only had to stir it in the morning, adding a few fragments of soft coal, carefully picked out.

Then, after having placed a kettle on the grate, she sat down before the sideboard.

It was a fairly large room, occupying all the ground floor, painted an apple green, and of Flemish cleanliness, with its flags well washed and covered with white sand. Besides the sideboard of varnished deal the furniture consisted of a table and chairs of the same wood. Stuck on to the walls were some violently-coloured prints, portraits of the emperor and the empress, given by the Company, of soldiers and of saints speckled with gold, contrasting crudely with the simple nudity of the room; and there was no other ornament except a box of rose-coloured pasteboard on the sideboard, and the clock with its daubed face and loud tick-tack, which seemed to fill the emptiness of the place. Near the staircase door another door led to the cellar. In spite of the cleanliness, an odour of cooked onion, shut up since the night before, poisoned the hot, heavy air, always laden with an acrid flavour of coal.

Catherine, in front of the sideboard, was reflecting. There only remained the end of a loaf, cheese in fair abundance, but hardly a morsel of butter; and she had to provide bread and butter for four. At last she decided, cut the slices, took one and covered it with cheese, spread another with butter, and stuck them together; that was the “briquet,” the bread-and-butter sandwich taken to the pit every morning. The four briquets were soon on the table, in a row, cut with severe justice, from the big one for the father down to the little one for Jeanlin.

Catherine, who appeared absorbed in her household duties, must, however, have been thinking of the stories

told by Zacharie about the head captain and the Pierron woman, for she half opened the front door and glanced outside. The wind was still whistling. There were numerous spots of light on the low fronts of the settlement, from which arose a vague tremor of awakening. Already doors were being closed, and black files of workers passed into the night. It was stupid of her to get cold, since the porter at the pit-eye was certainly asleep, waiting to take his duties at six. Yet she remained and looked at the house on the other side of the gardens. The door opened, and her curiosity was aroused. But it could only be one of the little Pierrons, Lydie, setting out for the pit.

The hissing sound of steam made her turn. She shut the door, and hastened back; the water was boiling over, and putting out the fire. There was no more coffee. She had to be content to add the water to last night's dregs; then she sugared the coffee-pot with brown sugar. At that moment her father and two brothers came downstairs.

"Faith!" exclaimed Zacharie, when he had put his nose into his bowl, "here's something that won't get into our heads."

Maheu shrugged his shoulders with an air of resignation.

"Bah! It's hot! It's good all the same."

Jeanlin had gathered up the fragments of bread and made a sop of them. After having drunk, Catherine finished by emptying the coffee-pot into the tin jacks. All four, standing up in the smoky light of the candle, swallowed their meals hastily.

"Are we at the end?" said the father; "one would say we were people of property."

But a voice came from the staircase, of which they had left the door open. It was Maheude, who called out:

“Take all the bread: I have some vermicelli for the children.”

“Yes, yes,” replied Catherine.

She had piled up the fire, wedging the pot that held the remains of the soup into a corner of the grate, so that the grandfather might find it warm when he came in at six. Each took his sabots from under the sideboard, passed the strings of his tin over his shoulder and placed his brick at his back, between shirt and jacket. And they went out, the men first, the girl, who came last, blowing out the candle and turning the key. The house became dark again.

“Ah! we’re off together,” said a man who was closing the door of the next house.

It was Levaque, with his son Bébert, an urchin of twelve, a great friend of Jeanlin’s. Catherine, in surprise, stifled a laugh in Zacharie’s ear:

“Why! Bouteloup didn’t even wait until the husband had gone!”

Now the lights in the settlement were extinguished, and the last door banged. All again fell asleep; the women and the little ones resuming their slumber in the midst of wider beds. And from the extinguished village to the roaring Voreux a slow filing of shadows took place beneath the squalls, the departure of the colliers to their work, bending their shoulders and incommoded by their arms folded on their breasts, while the brick behind formed a hump on each back. Clothed in their thin jackets they shivered with cold,

but without hastening, straggling along the road with the tramp of a flock.