

mattress which she had taken from her bed, leaving revealed a limp-looking tick half filled with straw. Close by, the baby slept peacefully in a wicker cradle.

"Why, what are you up to now, Mère Mathieu? Going to move before rent day comes around?"

"Oh, no, M. Vignol. I am just going to the pawn shop with this mattress—it is good for ten francs, at least; I must hurry, for they close at eight."

"What—and sleep on the straw?"

"Yes; it won't be for the first time. You see, my younger sister, who is a widow like myself—the one who was wardrobe mistress at the Variétés—has fallen ill again, and they won't take her at the hospital because they say she is incurable. So I must help her a little—she has always been so good to me. In a week or so, when I get my fortnightly wages from the store, I can have the mattress back again. All that bothers me now is—what to do with the baby while I go out. Usually the janitor's wife takes care of it for me; but tonight being Christmas Eve, they have company to dinner and are going to celebrate the "réveillon." So I don't know what to do with the baby.

Jean Vignol showed signs of agitation, not to say emotion.

"Don't do that, Mère Mathieu," he commanded. "Don't go to the pawn shop. I have fifteen francs—here are ten of them. Go straight to your sister. As for the kid—well, you can leave him with me. He sleeps like a church-goer; he won't disturb my writing. I dare say I can rock the cradle with my foot, and even manage to give him the bottle in case he wakes up and howls."

This was a great boon to the poor



Refreshing the Inner Man

Widow Mathieu, and she departed, showering benedictions upon the story-writer. He dragged the cradle in beside his writing table, and smiled grimly behind his bushy black beard as he muttered:

"Here's a new and somewhat peculiar sensation—my début as a dry nurse!"

In good humor over the unwonted function he has assumed, Jean Vignol seizes his pen and plunges into a vortex of adventure. His "copy" is due at the printer's tomorrow morning. The resurrection of his desperado, Biffe-Toujours, will change the whole drift of the story. Never mind! the romancer is in fine form tonight. His leading heavy criminal, hurled from the Eiffel Tower by an elegant but foxy vicomte, seizes in his descent one of the iron girders of the structure, climbs the rest of the way down with the agility of an ape, and gets away to begin life anew. Tomorrow, while they are dragging the Seine for his body, he will commit highway robbery and stab two policemen. The public want incident and action in a serial story, and must have it, or they won't subscribe for the paper.

At this point the baby woke up and began to cry. Jean Vignol dropped his pen, seized the milk bottle and administered it to the infant, not so very awkwardly for a beginner, and then rocked it to sleep again.

But, this done, the writer did not return immediately to his work. Instead, he sat pensively regarding the poor little mite, as it lay on the pillow, with two tiny fists, clenched as if already anticipating the fight for existence.

The cradle—infancy—has he ever given these a fair showing in his absurd novels? How false and stupid they seem to him now, all those yarns of his about children stolen and substituted one for another! Now here is a real, living, breathing child, and an orphan at

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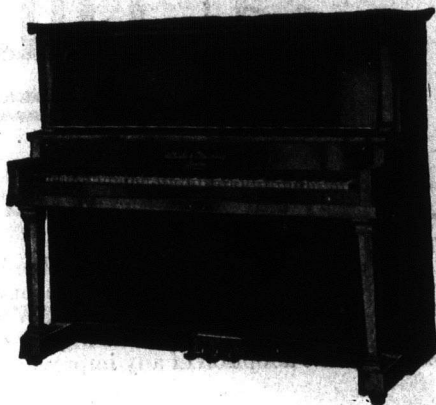
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