

# **MARIE CLAIRE'S WORKSHOP**

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Marie Claire's Workshop by Marguerite Audoux & F. S. Flint

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## MARIE CLAIRE'S WORKSHOP

### I

ON that day, as on every other morning when the time to start work was near, the Avenue du Maine was crowded with people walking hurriedly and with overloaded trams rolling swiftly towards the centre of Paris.

In spite of the crowd, I saw Sandrine immediately. She, too, was stepping out, and I had to run to catch her up.

It was Monday. Our summer slackness was coming to an end, and we were returning to the workshop to begin the winter season.

Bouledogue and little Duretour were waiting for us on the pavement, and big Bergeounette, whom we could see coming along on the opposite side, crossed the avenue, without heeding the traffic, in order to be with us sooner.

For several minutes there was gay gossip in our group. Then the four storeys were climbed quickly. And, while the others took their old places round the table, I went and sat in front of the sewing-machine, near the window. Bouledogue was the last to be seated. She blew



through her nose as her habit was, and immediately her work was handed to her she said: "Now we must work hard to please everybody."

The *patronne's*<sup>1</sup> husband looked at her very narrowly, and replied, "Eh bé. . . . You don't say you're going to start grousing already!"

He it was who always distributed praise or blame. For that reason, the girls called him the *patron*, while they called their mistress Mme. Dalignac whenever they spoke of her.

Bouledogue grumbled at everything and nothing. When she was displeased, she had a way of crinkling her nose which raised her lip and disclosed all her teeth, which were strong and white.

It often happened that the *patron* came to words with her; but Mme. Dalignac always restored peace by saying softly to them, "Now then . . . do be quiet."

The *patron's* angers were not in the least like Bouledogue's. They had gone as soon as they had come. Without hint or warning, he hurled himself at the girl who was to be taken to task, and for a whole minute he shouted himself to the choking point, swallowing half the words he had to say.

This habit of his irritated big Bergeounette, who took no notice of him and muttered beneath her breath, "What gibberish!"

The *patron* was the first to laugh at his own

<sup>1</sup> *Patron* and *patronne* mean *master* and *mistress*; there are no just English equivalents.

outbursts, and as if to excuse them, he used to say, "I am quick-tempered." And he added sometimes with a touch of pride, "I came from the Pyrenees, I did."

He it was who machine-embroidered the mantles and gowns of our customers. He was skilful and extremely careful, but after a few hours' work he used to go quite yellow and to seem broken down with fatigue.

His wife would touch him on the shoulder, and say, "Have a rest."

He would then stop his heavy machine and push back his stool, in order to lean against the wall, and he would remain a long while without stirring or speaking.

Between the *patrons* and the girls, there was a sort of friendly understanding. Mme. Dalignac was not afraid of asking advice of the workshop, and the girls gave her all their confidence.

As for the *patron*, if he shouted at the top of his voice to give us the slightest explanation, he spoke in quite a different manner to his wife. He asked her advice on the most trifling things, and never did anything to vex her.

Mme. Dalignac was a little older than her husband. This could be seen from her hair, which was beginning to go grey at the temples; but her face remained young, and her laugh was as fresh as a young girl's.

She was tall and also well-made, but you had to look at her closely to perceive this, so unobtrusive and far-away she always seemed.

She spoke softly and deliberately; and if she happened to be compelled to blame any one, she blushed and stammered as if she were herself the guilty person.

The *patron* cherished his wife with a tenderness full of admiration, and he often used to say to us, "There's nobody like her."

Whenever she went outdoors, he would stand at the window to see her cross from one pavement to the other, and, if she were late in returning, he would watch for her and become uneasy.

At these times, the girls knew quite well that he must not be asked for anything.

To-day the hope of work brought joy into the workshop. We could talk of nothing else but of a new customer whose payments would be certain, because she had a large business, and who would give us a lot of work because she had five daughters.

The *patron* was urging his wife to go and fetch some materials which had been announced.

"Quick, quick," he said. And he danced about so agitatedly that he knocked up against the dummies and the stools. Mmc. Dalignac laughed and everybody did the same.

The sun, too, seemed to be laughing with us. It shone through the window, and tried to rest on the cotton-basket and the sewing-machine. Its heat was still very mild, and Bergecounette opened the window wide to let it enter at its pleasure.