

## THE CHIFFONNIERS OF PARIS AT HOME.

BY A PARIS CORRESPONDENT.



HERE are in Paris upwards of 30,000 rag-pickers, who form a community apart, congregating together in "cités," that are hidden away in remote suburbs, rarely explored either by the dwellers in, or visitors to, the capital of pleasure. Through these cités, which are unfamiliar ground to most persons, I propose conducting my readers; but, before doing so, it will be well perhaps to commence with a few statistics.

Thirty thousand men and women trudge nightly through the city streets, seeking in the rubbish and refuse, in the sweepings of the boudoir and the kitchen, the saloon and the scullery, the hospital and the restaurant, daily bread for themselves and their families. This heterogeneous mass, which the fraternity of the hod and crook collect, finds its way eventually to the sorting-rooms (of which there are 200 in Paris), where the street-sweepings are sifted and sorted previous to reappearing in the world under new forms. About 1,000 men and 10,000 women earn their living in these *ateliers*, so we have a total of over 40,000 persons employed one way or another in the chiffonnier trade. The rag-pickers are divided into three categories: there are some—the *bourgeoisie*, so to say—who work on their own account, get the highest market price for their wares, and contrive, one day with another, to earn from forty to fifty sous per diem. These are looked up to by their colleagues as independent gentlemen and ladies, at the mercy of no hard taskmaster. A second class, lower down on the social ladder, are those who dispose of their findings at so much per pound, the good with the bad; these find it a hard matter to make the proverbial ends meet. And there is yet another category of chiffonniers, such as are paid a franc or less per day by the wholesale chiffon merchant, who is generally a thriving person, whilst his employés are the bare-footed outcasts of society.

The cités inhabited by the rag-pickers and their families are principally to be found in the suburbs of Clichy, Levallois, Malakoff, and the adjacent neighbourhoods. A weary tramp it is from these far-off quarters to the centre of Paris; at nightfall they start with the hod, the lantern, and the crook, walking over miles of unprofitable ground by all weathers, to earn a pittance hardly sufficient to keep body and soul together. Their cités are stretches of waste land upon which are erected wooden huts, affording a very imperfect protection from the inclemency of the weather. A gust of wind carries away the roofs of the wretched sheds, a pelting rain enters by every crack; the air is thick with foul smells, the atmosphere breathed is contaminated with the exhalations of half-rotten vegetables, offal, filthy rags, bones—all, in fact, which in England is thrown into the dust-

bin, and in France is nightly emptied into the streets.

The first cité that I explored was tenanted by the aristocracy of the rag-picking brotherhood who work on their own account. Even here, however, a strong dose of moral courage was necessary, for albeit that the Cité Cloys is the Faubourg St. Germain of the quarter, it is stamped with poverty, degradation, and insalubrity. It was close upon noon when I passed this cité in review; the night-labourers had returned, their hods had been emptied into the centre of the room, which served as bed-room, living-room, and warehouse. The majority of the men, worn out by their long tramp through the streets, had thrown themselves on the mattress, sacking, or heap of paper which stood in lieu of bed. Dingy-faced, matted-haired women were cooking the midday meal of the family; young girls and boys with hard-looking, unyouthful faces, were seated around the rubbish spread on the floor, sorting it. This was accomplished with the rapidity of experienced fingers. The paper was thrown here, the rags there; broken glass and crockery ware on one side, broken victuals on another; defunct cats and birds in this corner, remnants of wearing apparel in the opposite one, until in an incredibly short space of time the mountain had become so many mole-hills, the odour arising from the same being such as to make it a problem for me how it was possible for men, women, and children to live and sleep in the midst of such unspeakably foul smells without being overtaken by disease. And these were the relatively fortunate ones amongst this squalid population!

At a stone's-throw in the same street one comes across an archway over which is written "Cité Maupit." The ground on which this cité is constructed belongs, it is stated, to two or three deputies, who let it out to M. Maupit for 1,400 francs a year. The investment, I was told, is not a bad one for the latter. The wooden sheds he has built, each consisting of one room, he lets out to his ragged lodgers at two francs and a half per week, the rent being punctually claimed in advance under penalty of immediate ejection. To give an idea of the fragility of these sheds where the chiffonniers and their families live penned up like cattle, the following incident, which happened a few winters ago, will suffice:—On an unusually gusty afternoon ten or twelve of these "houses" were fairly carried off by the wind, and thrown a heap of débris to a hundred mètres distance from the spot were they had stood. The teachings of experience were not lost on M. Maupit; on the roof of every shed there are now placed huge stones to counteract the effect of the elements. The huts are revoltingly filthy, the dwellers therein not less so, and distress of the direst form is the normal condition of the poor people, who, according to the rules

of the cité, are bound to sell their findings at a fixed price to their landlord. He lives among them, and contrives to enrich himself by his enterprise. His house, consisting of two rooms, might lay claim to a sort of distant relationship with a museum: it contains a collection of art in its last stage of decrepitude, decay, and dismemberment. On the walls there is a fragment of an oil painting representing a moonlit landscape, which, to judge by what remains, had in its better days some artistic merit. There is a portrait of a knight of olden times, with many rents in the canvas; on the mantelshelf there is a bust of a king of France, with a damaged head, and the nose wanting; beside it is a Venus with no head at all. Amongst this rubbish is a quantity of caricatures dated 1830, whilst a corner beyond reveals a company of stuffed birds, over which is ranged a display of ancient china ware more or less broken. The carpet on the floor resembled a patchwork quilt, but as nothing matched anything in the room, the carpet was not out of keeping with its surroundings. In front of the merchant's door are huge heaps of wares waiting to be despatched to their different destinations. At one end of the enclosure is a wine shop kept by the landlord's nephew. When I entered the cité two tattered begrimed men were seated at the roughly made wooden table placed outside the cabaret. A woman of whom I asked some information invited me to seat myself beside these two gentlemen, and to question them, and thus I could learn all I wanted to know. But my companions remained taciturn. One, indeed, could not do otherwise, since he was dumb; the other, an old soldier who had served in the African campaign, bewailed a little his hard daily lot, but seemed too muddled in the head to prove a useful informant. All I learnt, in short, in reply to my questions was, that he slept on the paper he gathered in the streets, and that he changed it every four nights to get rid of the vermin. No doubt these two lodgers of M. Maupit were posted at his nephew's wine-shop table to attract the notice of any visitors who might chance to pass through the cité. The wine to which they were treated was surely charged twice the price the wretched stuff was worth, and the few coppers I left on the table for the men, I feel pretty certain were confiscated by the cabaretier.

After a cursory glance into several other miserable alleys, pompously styled cités, I proceeded to that known by the name of the Cité Fourcault, which is situated in the Avenue de la Révolte, a low-class disreputable neighbourhood, through which a nervous man would hardly care to pass after nightfall. The proprietress of this cité is (or rather was, for she has died since my visit to her unsavoury estate) a well-known character, who obtained a certain notoriety under the pseudonym of the "Femme Culotte," a name given her because she habitually donned masculine attire. It was she who built the cité called after her; it was she who ruled like a potentate in her tattered squalid kingdom; it was she who maintained order amongst her turbulent subjects, interfering personally in the daily frays, souvenirs of which she bore about with her in the shape of numerous scars on

her grizzled head and wrinkled face. When she died a short time since, a paragraph was consecrated to her memory in the majority of the French newspapers. It is reported that she had amassed a large fortune, a statement I can well believe. Her estate was a productive one, and she used her unlimited power to trade upon the miserable population who filled her cité. She had about 400 tenants, each paying a weekly rent of two francs, which gives a total of over 40,000 francs a year. Perhaps, to purchase the ground and erect the hovels, she may have expended 25,000 or 30,000 francs; this would certainly be the maximum. It is easy, then, to understand that she died wealthy. Of course she was exposed to the risk of her lodgers becoming bankrupt, in which case the rent was not forthcoming; but as she generally exacted it in advance, and turned out those who failed to pay, without the smallest compunction, her pocket never ran great danger.

I will now sketch in a few words the aspect of the cité which is christened after the "Femme Culotte." It is difficult to describe the painful impression produced on one's mind on witnessing this corner of Paris, where misery, degradation, and vice, engendered by the most deplorable promiscuity of sexes, has set its stamp upon every surrounding, and every person. Frenchmen, after a brief visit to London, are fond of expatiating upon the poverty-dens to be met with there; they would do well to remember the proverb about dwellers in glass houses, and to look at home first. The Cité Fourcault is a long alley, on one side of which wooden huts are built, each having two rooms, let out to different families. On the ground floor there is a sort of cellar, it can hardly be called a room, to which air and light are admitted by an aperture which may at one time have been a window, but has in the majority of cases lost its unique pane of glass. An ordinary-sized man cannot enter the door without stooping. The floor is clay, and for all furniture there is but a revoltingly dirty mattress thrown in one corner, a crazy chair or two, and a hardly less invalid table. Dirt, foul smells, and vermin are the predominant characteristics of these pestilential cellars, which teem with living creatures who seem lost to all sense of decency or shame. How can it be otherwise, when grown men and women, youths and young girls, little children and infants, are huddled together in one room, parents sleeping side by side with big girls and boys, whose apprenticeship to vice begins almost with their birth? Scenes which the pen refuses to transcribe meet the gaze at every step in these hotbeds of immorality and disease. Persons stricken down with contagious maladies lie in these cellars swarming with human creatures, who appear as indifferent to the dangers of contagion as they are to the most elementary rules of cleanliness or decency. Through the doorway of one room on the ground-floor I saw a woman lying with her newly-born infant beside her, whilst her husband, dead drunk, was stretched on the heap of refuse he had just emptied from his hod. A girl of twelve, with a face of forty, was preparing some food for the sick mother and wailing infant, while half a

dozen smaller children wallowed half-naked in the dirt on the floor. The male population, I was told by the "Femme Culotte," were good husbands and fathers as a rule. There was little wife-beating, rarely ill-treatment of children, and she pointed out to me here and there amongst her lodgers certain individuals who had lived upwards of twenty years in the cité, working like slaves to provide for their families, paying their rent regularly, and rarely frequenting the wine-shop. But the cité, of course, was not without its *mauvais sujets*, who were ready to rob, drink, fight, and caused the masculine-looking landlady much trouble at times.

After inspecting this haunt of misery and vice, I thought there could remain nothing more in the chiffonniers' cités to be seen. I was mistaken. Not far off, I was told, was the Petit Mazas, a cité so hidden from sight that, after its locality had been indicated to me, I went round about the cité during half an hour before lighting on it.

The agglomeration of unspeakably filthy hovels which go by the name of the "Petit Mazas," are concealed from public view by a decrepit, crazy wall, through an aperture in which one passes to obtain access to the cité. It is difficult to imagine that within a few miles of the luxuriant Boulevards such a place can exist, and it is incredible that the town authorities have not long ago swept it away. One would imagine the Petit Mazas was never visited either by a *sergent de ville* or a health officer. The hideously dirty cellars in which the rag-pickers live are a disgrace to a city which boasts of being the capital of civilisation. The sights and smells make one feel sick, morally and physically. From stagnant pools of dirty water the most nauseous emanations arise. The huts, made of mud, are reeking with foul humidity. The commonest necessities of life are not provided for in these squalid hovels. When I passed through the Petit Mazas, the July sun was

beating down upon the alley. The smells arising from the heaps of refuse, and the pools of slimy water, were insupportable, to me at all events, for the ragged creatures who seemed hardly to have either sex or age, that live here, were apparently impervious to offensive sights or smells. They were eating and drinking outside the doors of their hovels, a barrel turned on end or a rickety chair serving in lieu of a table. Some were sleeping stretched across the narrow strip of ground which separates the huts from the dung-heaps, their feet within the doorway, their heads almost touching the foul-smelling accumulation of filth. As far as I could judge from a cursory glance, the huts seemed almost devoid of furniture. In a few I caught a glimpse of a mattress, but the majority appeared to be provided with no sort of bedding. Yet on the walls of some of the huts I perceived a print almost effaced by dirt, or a cage with a canary in it, or a bunch of artificial flowers, found probably in the streets, and hung to a nail in the wall, to enliven the dismal poverty of these wretched habitations. There was one old man, now infirm and bent with age, who told me he had been born in the Petit Mazas. He had contrived to reach the age of eighty in this pestilential den of vice and destitution. There were young girls, who had been born and bred here, who had been reared in these hovels, and who, whilst yet almost children themselves, become the mothers of other children, miserable, sickly little beings, whom it made one's heart ache to contemplate.

I cannot pretend to decide whose task it should be to ameliorate the lot of the wretched population which fills the rag-pickers' cités. But that blame must be attached to some one is evident. In the present age of progress and civilisation, no community of French citizens should be allowed to drag out their existence in pestiferous mud-huts totally unfit for human habitation.

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## HINTS FOR PAINTING ON TERRA-COTTA.



**P**AINTING on terra-cotta divides with china-painting the favour of a great many amateurs who, though with skill in handling the brush, and a taste for colour, have not the power, nor perhaps the time, for under-

taking a large picture. There are numbers of articles in white and red terra-cotta sold now, which are admirably adapted for painting on; and I propose, in a short paper, to give a few hints towards their effective

decoration. I think it will be better for those wishing to learn, for me to suppose I have an article before me ready for painting, and the instruction I propose giving will be then clearer and more easy to follow. First, let me say that there are two ways of painting on terra-cotta, in oils and water-colours, the latter aided with Chinese white. The medium most preferred is that of oils; water-colours and Chinese white are more difficult to work, and less satisfactory in their effect when done, and also they are liable to crack and "cake off" in hot or dry weather.

On the table before me I have a round red terra-cotta plate, seven inches across. Very few colours will look as well, and none better, on this red than yellow and green. On this plate I intend to paint sprays of marigold. I take a sable or a camel's-hair brush, dip it into some chrome yellow, using turpentine