

# SEWING WOMAN, NEARLY BLIND, WINS PRIZE FOR NOVEL

Marguerite Audoux Amazes Paris by Getting the Academy of Women Prize of 5,000 Francs.

THE Latin Quarter is rejoicing. For years it has degenerated into more or less a foreign quarter where alleged French students lived in garrets, disporting their well-worn cloaks à la Rudolph, and helping the American students to spend their money. Work? Why, that was considered a secondary matter. One went to the Quartier Latin with his mind full of "La vie de Bohème" and pathetic Mimis and naughty Musettas. No one expected wonders from a Latin Quarter student. Paris had ceased to be disappointed at the lack of genius blossoming forth from the famous Boul' Miché.

Now Paris wonders, and it is a woman, a poor seamstress, half blind through overwork, that has caused such a sensation.

Away from the throbbing life of the city, far from the lights of the gay boulevards, in a garret high up in a tenement house near the Montparnasse Station, overlooking the Boulevard Raspail, lives Marguerite Audoux.

Nobody knew her a month ago. Now her name figures in large type in all the Paris newspapers, columns of reviews deal with her life and her work, reporters call on her at all hours, and photographers are eager to get her for a sitting.

A few days ago Mile. Audoux was wondering where the money for her rent would come from. Now she does not worry over it.

Her book, "Marie Claire," has worked the miracle. It has been awarded the prize of 5,000 francs offered by La Vie Heureuse, a Paris weekly, for the best book written by a French writer during the year.

The prize bears the name of "Prize of the Academy of Women," but no consideration has been given to the sex of the competitor.

With "Marie Claire" many other books had been entered for the competition, some of them by well-known writers whose name on the cover of a book assures its sale. The judges have considered their works nowhere near in value to the simple life story of Marguerite Audoux.

Of late years there has been no literary sensation in Paris equal to this announcement. She has written a simple story of how she lived her lonely life since the day her mother died up to the present moment.

It is noteworthy that the book contains no sensation of any sort. It is simple in thought, simple in construction, simple in form.

Octave Mirbau, one of the best known contemporary French writers, was so taken by the story that he wrote a preface to it. He says: "After reading 'Marie Claire,' although not wishing to wound any one's sensibility, you will be puzzled to find among our writers, including those who have already gained great glory, one who could have written on the same subject with such brilliancy, such perfect construction, and such purity of style."

In these days, when the majority of new books deal with difficult psychological subjects, which are morbid to a degree, it is good news, indeed, that a simple book written by a simple woman has gained such widespread recognition.



Marguerite Audoux Whose Novel "Marie Claire" Won the Academy of Women Prize of 5,000 Francs.

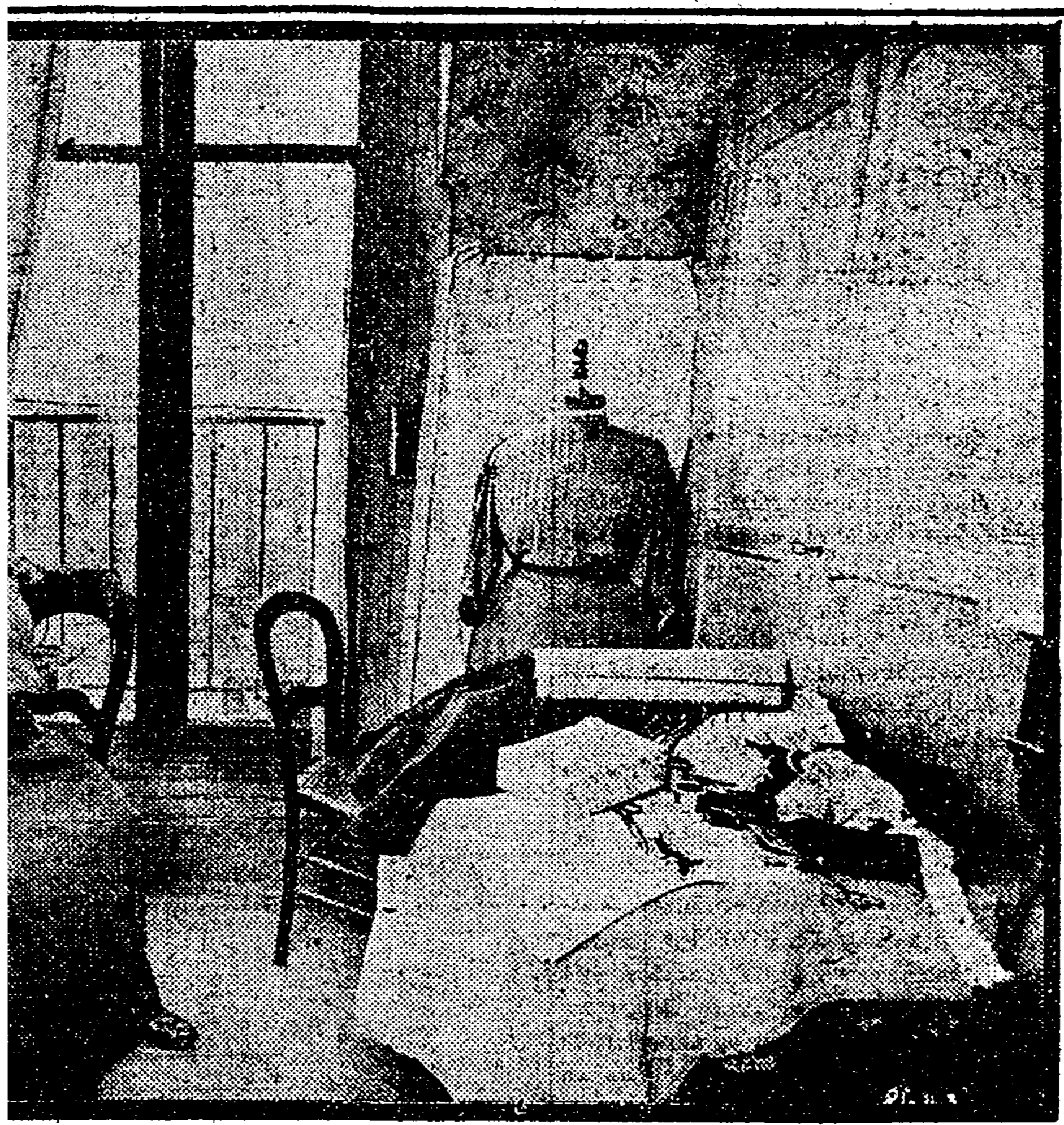
But where did Marguerite Audoux learn her style? She did not learn it, if learning means going through a regular course of study. In her youth she went to school and learned to read and write sufficiently bad and to sew very well.

It was many years later when she had already begun her life of a sweated seamstress in Paris that she started reading books. She never acquired any taste for modern fiction. Charles Dickens was her favorite author. She read

and reread all of his works that are translated into French, and she is still such a fervent admirer of his that the author's portrait, which she purchased for a few sous from one of the second-hand booths on the Quai d'Orsay, hangs above her bed to be near her when she sleeps and to inspire her when she sits at her rickety writing desk.

Mile. Audoux is just 45 years old. She confesses that she has never been beautiful, and her appearance is very much the same as any ordinary French

woman of her class. It is only when one talks with her long enough that one realizes the sweetness of her large eyes and the gold in her chestnut hair becomes apparent. She is not a coquette, and dresses poorly, and always in dark colors. Her surroundings are practically the bare necessities. Her little room is as small a garret as any bohemian student has ever had—long and narrow—so narrow that it is almost possible to touch both walls with stretched arms. The bed fills a good



Mile. Audoux, Seamstress, in Her Workroom Where She Wrote Her Remarkable Novel.

half of the space, and the rest is taken up by a writing desk and a cheap bookcase full of dilapidated volumes picked up obviously for a few centimes.

Light is plentiful; it streams in from two small windows, where a few pots of flowers flourish. They are the only bright spot in the room, a sweet souvenir of her childhood in the country.

She was born in Normandy, where her father was a poor farmer. When her mother died he took to drink and soon quit the village, leaving little Marguerite to take care of herself. After days of starvation the nuns of a convent near by took her in. They taught her elementary grammar and taught her her trade.

Years passed and the nuns hoped that she would become one of them, but Marguerite did not feel inclined to take the veil. One Spring morning she left the convent with a little bundle of clothes, boarded a cheap slow train for Paris, and landed in the capital with only a few francs, no friends, and in total ignorance of life in such a Babylon as La Ville Lumière, but with the firm resolution of living free, no matter how poorly, and alone.

She was then about 18, and healthy and strong, and soon found work. It was hard and badly paid, but with silent courage she worked on until her wages reached the huge sum of 60 cents a day.

She made but few friends. Somehow the people of her own standing were not to her liking, and she could find very little in common with them. She was too modest to be a coquette, and could not afford to take part in their pleasures, so she spent long, lonely hours in reading. Little by little she acquired the taste for literature, and just for fun she tried to write some short stories, but she never dared to show them to any one, and most of them have been lost or destroyed.

About this time her sight almost failed her, and it was impossible to work. It was a cruel blow, for how could she live without work? Then, when there seemed to be no prospects,

when her horizon seemed to be utterly black, she met her first two real friends, Francis Jourdain, the artist, and Charles Louis Philippe, the writer. They were as hard up as she was, or very nearly so, and they used to take their meals at the same little wine shop patronized by Marguerite Audoux. They soon took a great interest in this simple girl with such high ideals, and did all they could to help her in her distress and to encourage her in her efforts as a writer.

February of 1905 was a great day for Mile. Audoux, when one of her short stories was printed in Le Figaro. Since then the same newspaper has published several of her short stories.

All this time, though, she had in mind to write a book. The story of her life seemed to her the one subject she could write about, and without saying a word to anybody, she began to work. Soon she realized that the task was far above her power. Her education was not sufficient to carry her through, for her spelling left a lot to be desired, and she could not possibly trust herself to make a nice correct copy to send to the printer.

She confided in her friends, and they were astonished to find in the first half of the story such good qualities. They persuaded her to go on with her book, and they would help her, not in the actual writing of it, but would correct her rough copy, nothing more.

So the little circle of bohemians who dined at the little café, about ten of them, all got busy on Marguerite's proofs. Ten sheets went to one, five to another, twenty to another, and the book grew and grew, slowly but surely.

When Charles Louis Philippe died in 1900 the word "End" had yet to be written on the last sheet. Octave Mirbau was one of Louis Philippe's best friends, and to him he commended Marguerite Audoux just before his death. A few months ago Mirbau called on the seamstress-writer in her garret at Montparnasse. He saw the picture of Dickens, the portraits of Jourdain and Philippe, glanced at the

The Simply Told Story of Her Own Life Under the Title "Marie Claire," Has Made a Sensation.

few books on the mantelpiece, and was puzzled. He was willing to do all he could for his friend's protégé, but was this the woman who had written a book which she meant to enter for the women's prize at the Academy. Doubting, he took the manuscript and went to his studio, prepared for a couple of hours of boredom. The very beginning of it interested him. With no prologue, no preparation of any sort, the girl commenced her story. Quite a novelty for M. Mirbau. Here are a few lines of the beginning of "Marie Claire":

"One day we had a lot of callers at our house. The men came in silently, as if entering a church, and the women made the sign of the cross on leaving. On entering my parents' room I was surprised to see that a big candle was burning near my mother's bed. My father was leaning over the foot of the bed, looking intently at my mother as she lay sleeping with her arms crossed on her breast.

"The day after we were dressed in new clothes that had large white and black squares.

"Our neighbor, Mother Colas, kept us in her house for a day, then sent us to play in the fields.

"Often we accompanied our father to a place where men drank wine. Once he made me stand with my feet on the table among the glasses, and I had to sing the elegy of Genevieve de Brabant."

And so on and so on. Mirbau declares that he could not leave the book. He re-read it the day after, and became more and more enthusiastic about it. He was one of the judges for the Academy of Women prize, and as much he had the right to present one author for competition. He decided at once to father Mile. Audoux, and to show his admiration for her work he wrote the preface himself.

The judges declared it an easy winner, and naturally there are now many who try to discredit Marguerite's genius by suggesting that "Marie Claire" is not her work, but that she has either been helped by somebody, or else she has appropriated a manuscript of her late friend, Charles Louis Philippe.

Marguerite Audoux smiles at this gossip. She has shown her visitors her own manuscript, and it is a mass of corrections. Any one can see that she has labored hard with her spelling, and sometimes with her grammar, but the story and the construction are there, never interrupted, never changed.

All those who have corrected her proofs stand by her and are happy with her for her triumph.

"Marie Claire" is the book à la mode, the literary sensation of the year.

An English translation will soon be forthcoming, but whoever can read French, even a little, ought to read it in the original. Such a pure, simple, clear style is a rare treat. There is nothing distasteful in it. The life of the girl on her father's farm, the years in the convent, her struggles in Paris, her routine of work, her ideals, her sorrows, her ambitions, are charming reading, and the name of Marguerite Audoux, the seamstress-writer, is likely to become as well known abroad as it is now in her own country.