THÉODORE HERSART DE LA VILLEMARQUÉ

The Story of a Mill

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Léon Harmel, le Bon Père du Val-des-Bois
leonharmel.com

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THE STORY OF A MILL

The solution of the social problem is that, Industry being Christian, the worker should be happy.
AUGUSTIN COCHIN.

The story I wish to tell has every appearance of a legend, and it has been taken for one: yet nothing could be truer; the documents are within the public's reach, and anyone may consult them[1]. First brought to notice at the Congress of the *Catholic Works for Workers* at Nantes in 1873, then at Lyon last year, they have been printed, reprinted and circulated in a great many copies, and they have just been, in Paris, the subject of a lecture that Fr Lacordaire, Montalembert, Ozanam or Cochin would have wished to give, and would have given with enthusiasm. The last of these, assuredly, would have vied with Mr Albert de Mun for the happiness of treating in public a subject that would have drawn tears from him, and for which he was so well prepared by his studies in charitable economy. Had shorthand preserved the eloquent and ardent improvisation of the young military orator whose fire warms us and makes us young again, I should certainly not have taken up my pen. But why has no writer of the *Correspondant*, why has the most competent and at the same time the most agreeable writer we still have on economic matters, my friend Mr Alfred de Courcy, not taken it up? Our readers expected it, I have no doubt; how they will hold it against him!

Lacking the learning that others would have shown on this subject, which they would have approached by beginning with lofty moral and political considerations on the social question, I come, without preamble, to my story.

1. *Un fait nouveau dans la question ouvrière*. Paris, 1875.

I

Val-des-Bois is a large village of 2,200 inhabitants, near Bazancourt, in the department of the Marne. Half of its population is engaged in the textile industry; the other half works the land. An elegant Gothic bell tower of stone and brick, newly built, dominates the village, raising the sign of the cross above that of the mill.

The church, with its splendid rose window and its stained-glass windows in which a thousand emblems recall the touching wonders of the Sacred Heart, makes plain at last what thought inspired the head of the village's working population, Mr Jacques-Joseph Harmel, who came there from the Ardennes, where he was born on 15 May 1795: he placed his establishment under the protection of the cross and gave the place of honour to Him whom he called, not without reason, the "Master of the house".

This house until lately employed more than a thousand workers, aided by six powerful steam engines and by machinery built up and maintained by three generations of workers. Every day twenty-two people could be seen there, seated at a joyful family table which made one think, in spite of oneself, of the table of the Patriarch of Holy Scripture, eating the labour of his hands, in the shade of his vine, amid his young olive plants.

The Val-des-Bois mill was founded in 1840. Coming, all of them, from the towns or from the other workshops of the district, the workers brought to the Val the spirit that reigns in most industrial establishments: impious, demagogic, rebellious, rowdy, grasping, undisciplined, they were the very ideal of the type. To paint them, I borrow the brush of one of the venerable employer's three sons, Mr Léon Harmel; no one will accuse me of drawing a fanciful portrait:

"In the Factory," he says, "religion, its ministers and its worship are the object of a furious hatred. This hatred is fanned by abominable writings whose very existence is not even suspected by those

who have not lived in that world. The divine Eucharist is especially blasphemed there. Materialism is preached there. 'Once you are dead, all is dead' is an axiom accepted without dispute and put into practice down to its last consequences. On the other hand, the most ridiculous superstitions are respected there; anyone who mocked them would be sharply rebuked in the name of freedom of conscience.

"In the Factory, the family is reviled. Poor little children hear dreadful things said about their mothers; there are sons of fourteen who speak of their mother as a vile man speaks of a woman as vile as himself. Needless to add that respect and filial obedience are hissed at there and called cowardice.

"What is said of the corruption of peoples nearing their end may be said of most of our modern workshops. Vice is openly encouraged there, and, by an odious refinement, those who have not managed to commit crimes great enough to excite admiration invent crimes they have never committed. The most obscene talk is held there, with no regard for newcomers. It even seems that for certain debauchees there is an attraction, a kind of infernal treat, in corrupting the innocent. They fight over them as over a prey, and, thanks to this horrible eagerness, one sees girls who, through a monstrous precocity, know, scarcely out of childhood, as much evil as a long life of crime can teach.

"Lastly, with regard to society, revolt in all its forms is proclaimed there the holiest of duties; society is an enemy whose every setback is a gain for the worker."

And as an example of the social morality preached in the Factory, the author cites the case of a worker chosen by his fellows as a delegate in an election for having *filched* two hundred francs from his employer.

Inspired and spread by human respect, which, on the pretext of making men of them, brings the unhappy workers back to the worst of servitudes, the principles just set out are the canker of Industry.

They give rise to almost daily acts, made easier by the Monday debauches no less than by the promiscuity of sexes and ages inside the factory; one can well guess what goes on when the workshop lets out, after seeing men and women, girls and young men, side by side for long hours.

"Who watches over the workshop?" asks Mr Jules Simon. "A foreman, whose only task is to direct the work and speed it up; the rest is no concern of his."

Unhappy the girl whose fatal beauty has caught his eye! Too often he abuses the authority he has over her in order to seduce her, "and the employer shuts his eyes," continues the author of *l'Ouvrière*, "because nothing compromising happens inside the workshop." And we are not even told what the employers themselves sometimes do in the dark; indeed, it is unspeakable:

Quæ enim in occulto fiunt ab ipsis turpe est et dicere.

When the employer is a religious man, he is often content to be so in his own home and to fulfil his private duties, believing himself quit of all obligation to his workers because he has paid them punctually or even generously. Religion is an element that more than one takes into account at his own hearth, but does not think he ought to bring into social economy.

A Christian in the full sense of the word, the employer of Val-des-Bois had sounder ideas about the duties of his state. But how was he to fulfil them? How was he to undertake a task beyond human strength? How was he to heal those wounds of which his son has drawn us an all too faithful picture? How was he to restore to the worker, weaker and more ignorant than vicious, more oppressed than corrupt, more revolutionised than revolutionary, full possession of himself, his dignity, his freedom?

By freedom itself. At Val-des-Bois it was one of the first and one of the most powerful helpers. No pressure, no constraint, nothing im-

posed, everything proposed, less authority than devotedness: such was the system followed by Mr Harmel. “Souls must be touched as the Sister of Charity touches a wound,” he remarked, with great delicacy. He belonged to the school of the gentle Bishop of Geneva, who said: “On the royal galley of divine love there are no convicts; all the rowers are volunteers.”

Tormented, like St Francis de Sales, by a thirst for the souls entrusted to his care, he had the first quality of a good head of a mill: he loved the workers... Their employer by the choice of Providence, he did not mean to be so by halves; he wanted to be their father, not their master, and was determined to exercise his paternity to the full. Evenness of temper, courtesy of manner, irresistible gentleness, uprightness, justice without harshness, a personal management full of intelligence, a way of acting at once velvet and steel: the workers found in him what they look for in a leader. Seeing him constantly among them, dealing with them himself and not through hated intermediaries, they learned to know and to appreciate him. It was not at Val-des-Bois that anyone could have charged the employer with indifference and selfishness, treated him as an exploiter who must be made to disgorge, and written on the walls:

“Our enemy is our master.”

From the day he took over the management of the mill, his reforms showed that he meant to respect the dignity of the worker and to treat him, like himself, as a free man and not as a machine for producing: *Homo sacra res homini*. The rest that the body demands and that is granted to it everywhere except in France, he restored to the worker as a right, the right of the soul’s sacred day, the day of the family, of God and of all the festivals of the heart. Work was suspended on Sundays, even for the cleaning of the mill, even for repairs other than urgent ones.

Together with respect for Sunday and for the worker's freedom, the employer instilled in everyone a regard for the workshop. He saw to it that in these workrooms, so clean and so well kept, where the sanitary arrangements leave nothing to be desired, the moral order should match the material order; he separated the two sexes, giving them different exits; he banned, as far as possible, night work and all unsupervised day work, an all too common cause of disorder.

The ringleaders, the troublemakers, the workers most dangerous to the faith and morals of their fellows, or who brazenly displayed hatred of religion, contempt for the family and an antisocial spirit, were little by little removed, without fuss, and with them disappeared blasphemy, swearing and indecent talk.

In order to prevent injustice in the sharing out of work, petty persecution, brutality and all the other too common abuses of strength against weakness, he gave the apprentice the right to appeal to his authority in all circumstances. The question of wages occupied him no less: by raising them to the level of the largest establishments in the district, he was able to choose his staff from among honest, steady, moral clerks and workers, capable of becoming Christians, and so to prepare the regeneration of his mill.

Very particular care was given to the restoration of the working-class family, a subject which for believers calls for as much regret and effort as, for those who are not believers, it calls for rhetoric, sentimental and, alas, empty. He went straight to the effective means: he brought together in the same mill the father and the children, too often scattered. The mother alone was left to the care of the household, which is badly neglected when she works in the workshop; but as she is the guardian and the best guarantee of morality and of domestic economy, he took steps so that she should receive from her husband, together with the family's pay, which he paid out himself, a detailed note of the earnings of the father and of the children.

Along with the internal organisation of the mill, the external organisation best suited to improving the morals of the workers was the object of his care. It goes without saying that he neglected none of the institutions likely to increase their material well-being, and I like to think that, had he known of it, he would have imitated, and applied to his clerks, the institution of which Mr de Courcy is the author, and which he described to the readers of the *Correspondant*[2].

As early as 1842, shortly after the establishment was founded, a savings bank offered every possible facility to those who wished to save; then were created, one after another, a provident fund, a life insurance scheme, another insurance against accidents, providing compensation that made up the wages of the injured, and lastly food societies to fight the ever-rising cost of provisions, the cruel and perpetual worry of the labouring classes.

So many kindnesses, so many real services were not lost. I am therefore not surprised to hear his eldest son say that he ended by acquiring great influence over his workers: he took the stronghold by turning it; he threw into it the bread that won the heart while it fed the body; like that good king of France of whom a poet said that he was both the conqueror and the father of his subjects, he won in his mill a true paternal victory.

After a certain number of years, his workers were cited throughout the neighbourhood for their exceptional morality: much evil hitherto committed had been prevented, much disorder repaired; attendance at Mass on Sundays was less rare; the employer's example, backed by services more eloquent than words, found imitators. That aching of the heart from which he had once suffered so much at the sight of the empty parish church, he no longer had cause to feel. But his dearest wish was not fulfilled: on Easter Day, at the Holy Table, he found beside him only the members of his family; scarcely a few

2. See, in the issues of 10 June and 10 July 1872, the account of this incomparable institution.

women, not one man. If by chance someone wished to make his Easter duty, he went off in secret, as if to some bad deed, to an out-of-the-way chapel, so that none of his fellows should have occasion to suspect him and mock him.

One can see how far all these poor people still were from the model they had before their eyes, remarks Mr Léon Harmel; and, on this subject, he tells the following anecdote:

"As Lent drew to its close, the excellent employer never failed to urge those he thought he could persuade to prepare for their Easter Communion. One week he managed to get four men to agree to go to the neighbouring town, confess to a priest who was a friend of the family, and receive Communion early in the morning. Naturally, each of the four was unaware that he was not alone. The employer was delighted with his success, and on the Monday, quite impatient to learn the result of his plan, he went to see one of these men. Do you know what he heard? 'Sir, it is the first time, but it is the last. — Why, my friend? — You made me believe I would be alone. — And what of it? — When we went to confession, all went well; we hadn't seen one another; but at Communion I saw the other three, and they saw me too! Now I'm done for in the workshop; they'll pester us about it for six months! I shan't go back.' And he kept his word. The following year not one of the four could be persuaded."

This incident is enough, the author concludes, to tell you what the mill was like, though it was already on the way to moral progress.

Grieving at the meagre success of his efforts, and having obtained by himself, in what mattered most, hardly anything but negative results after twenty years, the employer decided in 1861 to call religious helpers to his aid.

II

Faith and the heart have a daring that makes human prudence tremble: Mr Harmel resolved to hold a mission for his workers. A mission in a mill! Are you serious? he must have been told; are you not afraid that your missionaries will be greeted, like those of the Restoration, with Béranger's refrain:

> Good Fathers, where have you sprung from?

Nevertheless the mission began, with daily instructions given in the parish church by two Fathers of the Society of Jesus, some for the working population, others for the farming population. Every Sunday there was a procession, and, to crown it all, the planting of a cross in the presence of the bishop of the diocese. The outcome proved once again that "where there's a will there's a way", above all when one wills only what God wills, for then one can do all things by the strength He gives. Entirely free not to attend the spiritual exercises, the workers came in fairly large numbers, out of curiosity, to hear the preachers, and many hearts were touched. The last day witnessed returns no less valiant than consoling. The most manly characters, the most finely tempered souls in the mill, those who usually held their heads high and spoke their minds, and to whom everyone listened, were seen to advance towards the altar, in good order, with a grave and firm step, and to kneel at the Holy Table. The tide of human respect, until then regarded as irresistible, was turned back and overcome by energetic wills closely united in God.

The voice that had said to the workers: *Come to me, all you who labour*, and to which more than one had freely responded, met with no less docility when it said to them: *Let your children come to me*. Fathers and mothers gladly entrusted them to the Sisters and Brothers whom Mr Harmel had called in to help him in his task. A crèche,

an infant school, two classes and a school were the cradle of a new generation taught to love God and man. In 1863 the venerable employer, who was adored in the workshop and was now called nothing but *the Good Father*, added to the works I have just mentioned another still more touching, an orphanage for girls, and gave the little orphan girls of his establishment the Mother of God as their patroness.

Over this sweet nest of Val-des-Bois he kept his gaze fixed, as on the hope of the Christian factory in France, seeing to it that the children entrusted to the care of the Brothers and Sisters did not miss their lessons, himself reproving and bringing back the little idlers, rewarding regular attendance, doing, in a word, the office of the Angel of the school of whom St Augustine speaks, that good angel who, lest the little bird, still without feathers, be trampled under the feet of passers-by, carries it back to the nest so that it may live until it can fly on its own wings.

Others, he too thought, will one day see, in place of this charming brood, my birds grown up and gathering fruit, singing, in fair gardens.

Besides the Daughters of St Vincent de Paul and the Brothers of the Christian Schools, *the Good Father* took on another indispensable coadjutor: he gave his children a chaplain, and had a chapel built in the courtyard of the works. Small at first, modest and built at little cost, it grew imperceptibly, was embellished and adorned year after year, and ended by raising above the mill chimney the fine bell tower I have spoken of. There, as in its hearth, the religious life of Val-des-Bois was concentrated; there were freely formed those Catholic associations in which the work of God in Industry at last came into flower.

It had been perfectly understood that if Association was not the only means of bringing about the regeneration of the mill, it was certainly the most effective, the shortest, the surest. Wherever, in fact,

Christian workers associate for good, as others associate for evil, they see renewed the miracle promised by the Saviour to those who gather in His name: He is present in their midst. He is the bond and the charm of their gatherings; He offers them a rallying point and a support, a true centre of resistance. Their character owes Him strength and assurance, their will a new spring; thanks to Him, their conscience can breathe; He preserves them from the weaknesses of our poor human heart; He arms them, as one body, with wit and good sense against the laughter of the workshop; He teaches them to despise the jeers of stupidity and the insults of hatred; He enlarges their soul, He frees it from a humiliating tutelage, He rids them of a grip that stifles them, He secures for them the sanctuary of conscience, their dignity as men, the freedom to believe and to act without mask and without fear; He gives them, in a word, the boldness and the pride of good in the face of the audacity and the arrogance of evil, and one cannot help, on seeing them happy, cheerful and sociable, repeating with the Psalmist that He is "the joy of their countenance". Son of a worker, a worker Himself, is Jesus not *of their body*, as Bossuet puts it in his great and simple language?

The Catholic associations of Val-des-Bois were to extend to all the members of the working-class family and to all ages; associations were formed for girls and women, and for boys, young men and men.

Woman being the pivot of all moral improvement in the family, they began with her: three associations, the first from the age of seven to First Communion, under the patronage of St Philomena; the second, up to fifteen, called the Holy Angels; the last, above that age, under the name of Children of Mary, all three distinguished by ribbons of different colours that were never to be taken off, even in the workshop, were opened to the best-behaved girls of Val-des-Bois.

Each association had as its attraction certain amusements wisely varied, encouragements given at the right moment, and lastly material, moral and religious advantages answering to the needs of each

age. It would have been impossible to succeed with sodalities of girls having no other meeting place than the church and no other bond than the religious one. Alas! they were not dealing with devout souls. The ways of the young women workers around Reims are only too well known; Mr Jules Simon does not flatter them. To be loved by the young members, so as to make them love God, was the Sisters' whole ambition; all their effort was bent on that. *Nothing by force, everything by love* was their motto in the mill as in the convent: the system of frankness, openness and freedom practised everywhere around them could not be lacking at the origin of the Circles they were establishing.

The first council was elected from a list of names they put forward, and every year, when it was renewed, election presided over it. To second their grandfather's efforts, the employer's granddaughters made it a point of honour to join the ranks of the members as soon as their age allowed, happy when the title of councillor gave them the privilege of visiting their sick companions, nursing them and comforting them.

A feast day for all three works was the wedding of a *Child of Mary* who had spent three years with honour in the Association. On the eve, her companions came to offer her the bridal wreath; not one was missing at the nuptial blessing, and at the end of the Mass many eyes grew moist when, at the feet of the Blessed Virgin, the girl began her song of farewell to the beloved Work.

On leaving the church, the bride, led into the garden where her happiest years had flowed by amid friendship, prayer and games, gave back to the Sister in charge her blue ribbon as a Child of the Virgin; each of her companions embraced her, then the venerable employer, with a few kind words, handed her, amid beating hearts and clapping hands, a little dowry of a hundred francs. What millions ever brought so many pure and shared joys?

The joys of the wedding table, true workers' love feasts, heralded by fanfares, crowned a day religiously begun at another table, where the bride, surrounded by her companions, had broken with the bridegroom the bread that makes the worker strong against the troubles of life, that bread of which Lamartine said:

> Each has his share of it, and all have it whole.

Despite the rebellious elements they had to work with at first, the association of the Children of Mary had been launched as early as 1863. A cluster of girls, certainly not perfect (there were none such in the mill), but of good will, trustworthy in their dealings, of firm character, and on whom one could count, offered the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul their first subjects to guide and to graft. What care some of the wild stocks required! But once it had taken, the graft put out vigorous shoots and soon bore fruit that no one had dared to hope for.

"In the first little group," relates the interesting report by Mr Léon Harmel from which I borrow this story, "there was a child named Julie. Her father was a notorious drunkard and a debauchee of the worst kind; her mother, a poor ignorant woman without education, had no notion of religion; her sister was given over to vice. She herself was unbelievably coarse and had an execrable temper. Julie took to loving the Sisters: can a Daughter of Charity let slip an opportunity of saving a soul? The Sister showed her a truly motherly tenderness; she felt that this rough, uncultivated bark hid an energetic nature capable of great devotedness.

"The wretched father, finding in Julie's virtue a living reproach, often ill-treated her, and more than once turned her out of the house, with her mother, in the middle of the night; he had indulgence only for his bad daughter, his all too faithful image.

"Julie's earnings alone came home; the father's stayed at the tavern. Never complaining of this injustice, the generous child kept

for her parents and her sister the best of the family's wretched meals, and often made do with a piece of black bread.

"Soon Julie's sister had a first child, then a second: Julie adopted them in turn, and while the bad mother ran after other debauches, Julie looked after the little children, dressed them, devoted part of her nights to them, giving them the tenderest motherly care. Every morning and every evening she took them on her knees and had them pray to Mary.

"One day Julie fell ill; she nearly died; she did not cling to life for her own sake, but what tears she shed over those she called her dear little children!

"If you go to the mill one day, you will stop by a poor worker's house where two bright-eyed little boys are playing. When the workshop bell rings, you will see, in the distance, a Child of Mary coming, whom you will recognise by her blue ribbon. Her face, worn thin by suffering and privation, has lost the graces of youth, but it bears that lovely glow which Mary makes shine on the brow of her Children. Then you will hear the cries of joy of the two little boys as they run to throw themselves into the girl's arms, crying: 'Hello, Mummy!' And you will be moved as you gaze on this lovely group. That girl is Julie; and when she has told you her life, you will understand what wonders the association of the Children of Mary can work in the mill."

On leaving this association through marriage, one entered the Work known as the Christian Mothers.

Its council had as directress, instead of a Daughter of St Vincent de Paul, one of the ladies of the mill; it met every month and looked after the sick, and particularly the young mothers, during and after their confinement, giving them a home help for ten days, not to mention the cradle and the baby's layette.

Every week, on Tuesday afternoon, the members who had time to spare worked for the clothing store of the work, in the company of

the ladies of the Harmel family. Every year a tombola was drawn, and a grand evening entertainment given exclusively for the mothers, who could enjoy together the success of their little children in simple plays arranged for the very young. Two other annual children's feasts were held in the chapel. "That day," says Mr Léon Harmel, a witness still moved, "all the pews are filled with bright-eyed children, and with mothers carrying in their arms charming little babies with astonished and delighted eyes. The sermon is short, for the preacher could not obtain a long silence from these little birds of the good Lord, whose twittering moves and charms the parents' hearts. At the end of the Mass comes the solemn blessing of the children, followed by a hymn sung by voices harmoniously out of tune and delightfully uncertain."

How could so many *treats* (the word is a worker's) have failed to win all the mothers' hearts for the Association? But although admissions were not too strict, it was forbidden fruit for those judged wholly unworthy to taste it; towards them the Council became as inexorable as the Dragon of the Hesperides, and the garden of the golden apples was irrevocably closed to them.

Only once was the door forced; here is the occasion:

An unmarried mother asked to join the Association; an unmarried mother! Judge of the scandal caused by such a claim. Her fault, however, was an old one, we are told, her conduct irreproachable, and she had brought up her child very well. Rejected unanimously, she went straight to the directress of the Work, the daughter-in-law of *the Good Father*, and offered to come and plead her cause herself before the Council, undertaking to prove there, in every detail, with the evidence, or rather the sins, in hand, that not all the good lady councillors could cast the stone at her.

The prudent directress judged the ordeal perilous, and the Magdalen was admitted, without deliberation and without fuss, out of

consideration for more than one former sinner, less public, previously received into the Work of the Christian Mothers.

So you see whether they had all always been saints! But once converted, what zeal to share their happiness with those around them! What prayers to obtain the same grace for a beloved husband or son! What tears shed in secret at the monthly meetings in the chapel, where the poor women loved to come to renew their courage and their faith! And what joy, too, when the husband, who had so long obstinately insisted on *doing as the others did*, made up his mind to do as his pious wife did!

One day one of these hardened sinners was himself weeping for joy, having just poured out his heart to the chaplain of the work; and as the excellent employer, no less joyful than the worker, said to him: "Oh! my dear friend, how pleased the good Lord is with you!

— Ah! sir," he exclaimed, "I don't know whether I shall give as much pleasure to the good Lord as to my wife!"

In the same circumstances, and after the same effort of courage, another remarked that his wife had never embraced him more tenderly: "Our home is becoming a paradise," he added, deeply moved, "and you can no longer tell which you love best or which is happiest."

The report I have before me is strewn with such charming incidents; the author is quite right to say that the mother is the same on every rung of the social ladder, and that she becomes the redemption of her family as soon as she becomes a Christian. I am not surprised that at Val-des-Bois she exerted such an influence on the Men's Associations. Truly, a mother's heart would make a bundle of thorns burst into flower.

The Lazarist Brothers who ran the classes devoted all their Sundays, with the zeal and self-denial of their Order, to the mill's three men's Circles. One was admitted to the first from nine to twelve; to the second, from twelve to sixteen; and lastly to the third,

after seventeen. The boys, the young men and the men had their councillors, elected every year, and their own meeting places.

For three years, from 1865 to 1867, the Great Circle was prepared, with a small nucleus of faithful young men who formed its first council. While the first two Circles were naturally subject to the guardianship and supervision required by children whose reason is not yet mature, it was not so with the third. With the older members the same system was followed as with the women, a system of freedom guided by prudence. As attached to their director as to one another, the members of the Great Circle were held, under a fraternal regime of their own choosing, by very strong but very supple ties, which had nothing servile about them; the independence they enjoyed was the best answer to the tirades against clerical intolerance. The prejudices of the workshop were combated no less by granting no privilege to the members of the Associations in the distribution of work, by treating them as equals with the workers whom the employer was sorry not to find in the Circles, and by using no indiscreet pressure on the latter.

"There are a good many workers who do not yet practise," Mr Léon Harmel said to a visitor to the mill, "far too many, no doubt, and a fair number who are outside the Catholic Associations; but I am anxious that there should be some, so that freedom may be as apparent as it is real here." And he added, with great good sense: "It is not enough for Catholic works to be based on freedom; the worker must understand it and feel it."

Prodigious success had not made him swerve from the fatherly method: to draw the workers gently to God, not to drag them along behind him.

Its results could be seen in the piety of the members of the Associations, full of frankness, warmth and good humour, and in their eagerness to take advantage of all the spiritual benefits offered them

by the meetings in the chapel, the Easter retreat and Communion on the principal feasts of the year.

To make the work of the directors of the Circles easier, and at the same time to show that religion is indifferent neither to our intellectual needs, nor to our material interests, nor even to what can bring a little charm to this sad life, all the practical advantages and all the recreations that had been put at the service of the women's associations were placed at the disposal of the Men's Associations.

New institutions, similar to those that had been operating for twenty years for the benefit of the whole mill, and which have been mentioned above, were set up for the three Circles, with special incentives.

A savings bank secured for workers who had come to the establishment with debts a capital of two, three, four and even six thousand francs.

A second fund, for the Little Circle, accepted the smallest deposits and paid interest at 5 per cent, like the fund of the Great Circle, plus a bonus of 10 per cent on deposits made between the ages of twelve and eighteen and not withdrawn before the age of twenty-one.

I shall not speak in detail of the life insurance, the accident insurance or the other relief funds; but I should never forgive myself if I passed over in silence the Works designed to procure goods cheaply for the members: clothing at wholesale prices; butcher's and baker's goods below local prices; fuel and certain vegetables by the wagonload and at bulk-purchase prices. Above all I shall take care not to forget the *hostel*, as it was called, a touching work, where orphans, and widowers with their young sons, were fed at greatly reduced prices.

The bread of the mind was served no less abundantly than material bread to the members of the Associations: adult classes, lectures, useful and pleasant talks on every practical subject likely to give the worker, along with instruction, the noblest of pleasures; a library,

newspapers, reviews: nothing was neglected that could interest minds and keep them constantly awake.

The matter of recreation was not the least well provided for: "A little recreation is necessary," *the Good Father* said to someone.

I have before me a report on the mill's Society of Actors, by its president, which deals with everything that makes for pleasant evenings: comedies, dramas, comic songs.

In another report, entitled *The Band* or *The Brass Band*, I read: "The circle's band comprises forty-three players, forming a complete military band. Every Sunday afternoon it enlivens the gardens of the Circle, and in winter the ground floor. Every month, and on all the great feasts, it leads the members to the chapel and brings them back to the Circle. No evening gathering, no festivity of any kind, without the band; it always communicates high spirits, it charms hearts, it disposes them to that brotherly fusion which leads quickly to Christian friendship."

Quintilian said it differently, but no better: that no teaching has such power to establish discipline in the city and to maintain it there.

A note on the Choral Society tells me that it formed, in the chapel, the core of the plainchant, that the whole congregation sang in two choirs, and that at Val-des-Bois there was no High Mass, no Vespers, no Benediction without music. Fine traditions of the Catholic Church, happily preserved! The venerable employer could have turned round the famous line of Louis Racine: with him, music truly led to Faith. His eldest son seconded him in this as in everything; it was he who played the organ at services; and music was not the least charming auxiliary of his apostolate: in the mill as in the chapel, happiness and piety were brother and sister.

Of all the religious feasts, that of the Sacred Heart gave a special character to the festivities of Val-des-Bois.

On the last Sunday of June, a fine and joyful procession of the Blessed Sacrament wound its way around the mill, in which all the

workers' associations, each under its banner, marched past in military order.

At the head, the banner of the trade, followed by the youngest children of the mill, the girls' schools, and the associations of St Philomena, of the Holy Angels and of the Children of Mary, led by the Sisters. Immediately before the Blessed Sacrament, two of the employer's grandsons, one dressed as the Child Jesus, holding in his hand a cross on which could be read the words *Jesus the Worker*; the other as the little St John, clad in the traditional fleece and carrying the crook, as in Raphael's painting; next, a group of orphan boys and girls; then the mothers, and among them the wives and daughters of the employers; in a place of honour (an admirable idea), the widows; lastly, the boys of the schools, the Little Circle, the Great Circle with its brass band of forty-three musicians; and, closing the march, still upright despite his years, looking happy, his brow radiant under its crown of white hair, the patriarch of the mill, surrounded by his sons.

A wide bridge thrown across the river that drives the machines, at rest that day and part of the feast as well, joined the two banks and led to a station altar, a splendid nosegay of foliage, flowers and lights, from the top of which the blessing of the Blessed Sacrament came down upon the whole workers' family kneeling there.

A touching ceremony! Consolations and honours well due to these poor working people, so despised by those who do not work, or who do not recognise in them brothers in Jesus the Worker!

"Every time it has been granted us to witness such a sight," says one of the most inspired organisers of these enchantments of the heart, of piety and of work, "every time our tears have flowed. You would have been no more unmoved than we were before the touching procession of a working population. The graceful little children gave such hope! The hearts of the young seemed to beat so truly for noble aspirations! The fathers and mothers seemed so proud and so happy at their conversion! Oh yes, like us, you would have wept and hoped.

In the folds of the floating banners, in the enthusiastic singing, you would have read the word of the future, and you would have said, like that poor old locksmith, too long rebellious to the voice of God: 'How beautiful it is! How beautiful it is! I want to be one of them!'"

Such demonstrations, true reviews of all the religious forces of the mill, did indeed have the happiest influence there on recruitment to the Catholic Associations.

But one last force dominated all the others, a force to which the revered employer had never ceased to have recourse since the beginning of his apostolate. If such a work had required a great deal of time and a great deal of perseverance, a rare understanding of men and of affairs, and, lastly, all the heart of *the Good Father*, not to mention fairly considerable expense, then more than money, more than time, more than intelligence, more even than heart, I say it plainly, it required a whole lifetime of appeals to divine assistance.

By prayer the miracle of the mill's conversion was wrested from God; it was prayer that brought the workers to Him by the hundred, where only four could be persuaded, once, in twenty years, to make their Easter duty.

In the evening, on leaving the mill and passing the chapel door, they would go in to pray a little, and so rested from the fatigues of the day.

The chapel was for them what, in certain factories, the little garden is for the worker, left to him so that he may relax in the open air by doing a little gardening.

An incredible thing! In that chapel several felt called to a still more perfect life: nine men and women religious and three priests came from there. And with what joy the employer gave them to their new Master!

As he saw the wonders of prayer multiply around him, he prayed with greater fervour; but it was no longer only for his own mill, it was for all the factories of France, for all the factories of the world;

and the Catholic industrialist's prayer no longer rose from a single heart, but from a thousand hearts united in God Himself.

It was repeated at the Lyon Congress by the many friends of the workers gathered from the East and the South, from the West and the North. I shall not set it within these profane pages; but I cannot resist the pleasure of quoting the no less remarkable words with which it was followed by one of the worthy sons of the Christian who found it in his heart:

"Allow me to tell you: for me, prayer is my only hope. Sons and grandsons of industrialists who were the fathers of their workers and lavished love on them, we have inherited this passion. We have measured the wound in its full extent, and we have seen the unhoped-for results of Catholic action among those populations that had been despaired of. Seeing the remedy so easy, we dreamed of it for so many poor souls who are lost every day, and you welcomed us with such sympathy that we thought the dream was about to become a reality.

"Must I confess it? I never approach this subject without deep sorrow. What is more dreadful than to witness the death of dearly beloved brothers without being able to bring them any help but that of an empty word which I feel to be powerless! It would be better to veil one's face and forget. But up there, on the great mountain, I see Jesus Christ shedding His divine blood in streams for His best-loved children, the poor workers; His sorrow breaks my heart, and if I can bring Him no other consolation, I wish at least to weep with Him. Perhaps others will weep with me, and these tears will do violence to Heaven, which will at last send us apostles of the factory."

A great acclamation rose from the audience: "You are the apostle of the factory!" and the enthusiastic applause that once greeted Fr Lacordaire, in almost the same circumstances, broke out on all sides.

The humble Christian suffered from it no less than the apostle of our youth; the grief, the gesture, the tone were the same: "Ah! gentlemen," he cried, "what pain you give me! The true works of God begin

only with trial! I have always seen it so; and you cover me with applause! Ah! what pain you give me!"

He who had acted so much and prayed so much, with all his family, for the conversion of the mill; he who would gladly have suffered for the success of his undertaking; he who aspired to no other glory than that of St Paul: he was given an ovation, he had the honours of the Congress! How could he not have been alarmed? How could he not have been seized by all the scruples that torment the greatest servants of God?

The event I have still to relate seemed to come and justify fears that were certainly quite unfounded.

III

Barely three weeks had passed since the Lyon Congress when he wrote to a friend:

"The applause at Lyon frightened me, and I saw God against us. Humiliation is the beginning of every serious work. So we must be reassured, for the trial is so great that the harvest is bound to be immense. The Val-des-Bois mill has been destroyed by fire. The magnificent four-storey works is now nothing but a shapeless heap of smoking ruins. Three hours were enough to destroy what had cost so much money, so many years. What an awakening on Sunday, at three in the morning! What piercing grief ever since! All our poor workers are in despair; but theirs is a Christian grief. On Monday, at seven o'clock, our whole family received Communion, followed by more than two hundred of these poor people, who came to ask the Sacred Heart for strength and courage...

"Our good father has borne this dreadful blow with sublime resignation. He has seen the fruit of his whole life's work burn in a few hours! But his submission to God is so great that he will be our redemption, for it is not he who has sinned."

It was in the night of 13 September 1874, the eve of the Exaltation of the Cross (a most remarkable date), that God sent this terrible trial to His friends of the Christian mill.

The fire broke out spontaneously in three different places, beginning with the employer's own office. In an instant it devoured the cash box, the account books, the papers, and a valuable library full of notes and documents of great interest for Catholic works for workers.

Woken with a start and hurrying to the scene of the disaster, the employer, at the sight of his mill already half consumed, knelt down and simply made to God the sacrifice of his fortune.

Except for the ground floors at the back, everything was destroyed. The fire stopped only at the foot of a statue of the Blessed Virgin, placed in a niche near the chapel, the only building left standing in the courtyard of the works.

To the losses caused by the burning of the mill, enormous losses although it was insured, a new misfortune was added, which was the consequence of the first:

"After trying us in our goods," Mr Léon Harmel went on, "God willed also to try us in our family, in our dearest affections. The death of my grandmother followed close upon the catastrophe of the 13th, thus adding a new and crueller grief to our sorrows, already so great. But we repeat with the Patriarch of Idumea: *May the most just and most lovable will of God be done in all things, may it be praised and eternally exalted!*

"God had chosen my father to be the apostle of the factory; He has chosen him to be its victim too."

And passing from his grandmother and his father to his workers, of whom he said in another letter: "We are more moved by their grief than by our own," he wondered how they could be found places, what was to become of them, and above all what would become of their souls during the long months of the rebuilding of the mill; the double scourge that threatened them weighed heavily on his mind.

Unemployment! Those for whom work is the greatest good know what it means.

A woman of a famous name, Madame de La Rochejaquelein, used to tell how she had understood it only on the day when the child of a poor working woman, in prison with her for a very different cause, whom she asked, as she left him, to pray to God for her, answered artlessly: "Yes, madam, I'll pray Him always to give you work."

From the very first day, *the Good Father* set about finding work for his workers, and preparing workshops for all of them where they would not be idle. Wages, lodgings, relief, even schools: he provided for everything, with a solicitude, a presence of mind and a self-denial astonishing in the midst of his misfortunes and in the face of smoking ruins. The Brothers and Sisters would go ahead of his workers to settle them in the manufacturing centres that might be willing to receive them. The women, the girls and the children would stay at Valdes-Bois; only the working men would leave, in detachments, each with its leaders, the elected men of the Catholic associations, its convoy and its ambulances.

On 20 September the first detachment was to leave for La Neuville-lèz-Wasigny, in the Ardennes. Gathered in the chapel in the morning, all the workers received the farewells of the mill chaplain. In an address drawn wholly from the heart, he reminded them of the exile of God's people, and consoled them with the thought that if they went away weeping, it was to sow the good seed elsewhere and to come back with joy in their hearts and their hands full of sheaves.

As they came out of the church, *the Good Father*, from the top of the steps, himself addressed a few strengthening words to them:

"You will perhaps be less well paid and less loved elsewhere, my children, but you will love one another, and you will remain faithful and worthy of your reputation for piety; then you will come back; God will surely allow it; you will come back to the mill, which is going to be rebuilt to receive you again."

Then he went to the Great Circle. The president, the head foreman of the mill, who had fought the fire valiantly and had wounded himself with an axe while cutting away a burning roof, was waiting for him and was the first to receive his counsel and advice. There were very tender and very fatherly words for each one: "You, take your wife with you; you are too young to be separated."

"You, go by the house and take a blanket for the little one." (His heart forgot no one.)

To a musician of the brass band he said: "Remember to take your instrument, and be sure to play it now and then on the march, and in the evening too, at the halts, for we shall have to cheer our young people a little and keep them from giving way to sadness."

The moment of farewell came: *the Good Father* stood by the door and embraced each of his workers one by one as they went out. The last was the oldest man of his house. As he saw him coming, tears overcame him, and he held him long clasped in his arms, sobbing.

Early the next morning the emigrants rose; each one appeared dressed in his Sunday clothes, "for," they said, "we must keep up our courage and do our duty freely." And they set off, without daring to turn round to look at the chapel, for fear of weeping.

Every day a new detachment left. After some time there arrived, from the depths of the Ardennes, little notes addressed to the mothers or sisters who had stayed at Val-des-Bois: "All is well, we are happy."

They were no less happy in the various industrial centres that had generously given hospitality to the emigrants from Val-des-Bois; they are happy still to have received them; the emigrants brought with them their Associations, their kindly and gentle ways, their Christian virtues; they are known by that fragrance by which, according to the old Celtic legends, one recognised the happy travellers who had passed through the groves of the earthly paradise and whose garments had kept its scent.

But when will they return to this beloved Val which, in their tender piety, they call the *Val of the Sacred Heart*? When will they be reunited with their wives, their children, and *the Good Father*, whom they nearly lost after the catastrophe, and whom they will find more vigorous and warmer of heart than ever?

The return, already begun for a large number of them, who are working to rebuild the ruins, will take place for all before 23 August next, the day of the solemn blessing of the new establishment.

With what rapture they will say once again, this time with one voice and one soul, giving thanks to God: "All is well, we are happy!"

Hersart de la Villemarqué,
Member of the Institute.