MORITZ KAUFMANN

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

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A MODEL FACTORY IN THE VAL-DES-BOIS

By the Rev. M. Kaufmann.

The spinning factory of Harmel Fils is situated in a broad and thickly-wooded valley at no considerable distance from Reims. It is reached by an avenue of trees, chiefly poplars, which hide from view the weaving-sheds and homely cottages of the operatives, until the traveller comes up quite close, when suddenly he finds himself in the midst of a group of buildings, all bearing the stamp of sanitary comfort and peaceful ease. Every cottage has its tiny vegetable garden, and there are general recreation grounds. There are schools, libraries, baths, and lavatories, even a hostelry for unattached bachelors, all on a modest scale, but well calculated to fulfil their immediate purpose of ministering to the material and moral requirements of a contented community. The principal and most costly building of the place is the chapel, placed in a central position, and at once reminding the visitor that the bond which unites the families of employers and employed is that of Christian union and religious sympathy. As he lingers on the spot, he will notice with agreeable surprise, frequent exhibitions of free and happy intercourse between the masters and the men, strangely contrasting with the prevailing conditions of factory life in the neighbourhood.

Here we have an instance of the practical effects of Christian socialism, and, as such, it deserves our attention none the less for the fact that we meet with it in the country which may be said to be the cradle of modern socialism, and which has been most fruitful in the production of socialistic schemes and failures, when these schemes have been subjected to the test of practical experiment.

The factory in the Val-des-Bois was founded in 1840 by the father of the present owners, *le bon père*, as he was usually called by

the working people of the place. He had left his home and paternal factory in the Ardennes to establish himself in this locality, and on his arrival was much struck with the contrast in the religious and moral habits of the working people in the two places. His first endeavours were directed towards the improvement of the moral and religious condition of his own workpeople. For twenty years he continued his efforts, but in vain. He met with nothing but apathy among his own people and antipathy in the irreligious outside world. At last he called to his aid a few Sisters of Charity and Brothers of the Ecoles Chrétiennes for the purpose of educating and Christianizing the employés of his establishment, and the change, he tells us, was marvellous. The account of his subsequent successes reads like a strongly-seasoned missionary report, though evidently written without any conscious design on the part of the writer to lend sensational interest to the story, how the organization of "La grande famille" became complete by infusing the religious ardour, or to give point to the moral drawn from the tale as to the duties of the Christian employer—"la mission sociale du patron."

It is unnecessary, however, to dwell on this part of our subject, interesting as it would be to draw a touching picture of simple faith, not free from a touch of superstition, in one of the modern captains of industry, not by any means deficient in common sense and business capacity. We would rather proceed to describe the industrial life in and the working of economic institutions connected with the establishment.

In the first chapter of the "Manuel d'une Corporation Chretienne," by M. Léon Harmel, giving a full account of its scope and intention (a work to which we are mainly indebted in the present sketch), we have clearly laid down the principles on which it is based. It thus speaks of the employers' responsibilities:—

As "industry without religion and without faith has produced pauperism, that malady of modern societies, in which material misery

and moral degradation are found side by side," it must be the first duty of the employer—and Harmel Fils practise what they preach—not only "in strict justice to satisfy the demands of his workmen by paying fair wages," but also from a spiritual and temporal point of view to fulfil the duties of a father towards them. Unless this is done, the demoralizing influences of factory labour in destroying family life, and the loosening of the personal bond of union between the masters and the men where industry is carried on on a large scale, will seriously affect the purity and peace of society. Nay, more than this, the "question about work and wages must be referred to the law of God, which sometimes obliges the employer to grant more than what the laws of supply and demand can compel him to do." These are commercial principles of a much higher order than those generally met with among employers of labour. They are, if faithfully carried out, the best refutation of such random statements as that of Guesde, a prominent socialist, in his pamphlet on Collectivism, that the exactions of the feudal lords were nothing in comparison with those of modern employers, whose profits he stigmatises as "la dîme et la corvée patronale." A glance at the rules and regulations of the Harmel factory shows on the contrary that not only justice, but generosity, guides these "seigneurs du capital" in their dealings with those whom they employ.

Permanent engagements are the order of the day in the Val-des-Bois. "We are extremely reluctant to dismiss the men. With us, it is well known, they are not looked upon as instruments to be got rid of when lengthened use has diminished their value. During the stoppage of work, owing to the factory being burnt down in 1874, salaries continued to be paid as before; and the same happens now whenever a partial discontinuance of work occurs in consequence of a break-down in the machinery." The result is that the workmen are attached to the firm and regard themselves as members of the family. There are no disputes about wages, and they rarely leave their present employment

to "better themselves" elsewhere. Wages are paid partly by the day and partly by piecework. Premiums are thus held out to encourage superior skill and energy whilst securing a certainty of weekly earnings. The rate of wages is made independent of the ordinary vicissitudes of trade. "We have never lowered our tariff, whatever the crisis we ourselves have been affected by, our wages have always followed an ascending scale."

Man is not regarded in the light of a machine in the ateliers of this "Usine." His moral and religious welfare is looked after and promoted by a network of associations, whilst every effort is made outside the factory to cherish home-affections and to preserve or restore family life, and also to protect the employés against contamination by the flippant irreligiosity and immorality of the outside world. "The object of our organization," says M. Léon Harmel, "may be summed up under these two heads: The associations are intended to militate against the temptations of evil surroundings; the working men's councils to support the direct authority of the employer, so often defied in these days of vaunted equality." We will introduce our readers to both, and first to the associations.

In a population engaged in factory labour, owing to the disturbed condition of family life, the need of association is felt keenly. The dulness of the lonely lodging and the sense of utter isolation weighing upon the mind, left to its own resources, inclines men to associate and to draw strength and cheer from mutual companionship. In France, where home-life, under the most favourable circumstances, has fewer attractions than in this country, community of interests incline men of the same calling to meet in public places of resort, and one variety of these are the "cercles," or working men's clubs, which are most of them tinged with socialism, as *e.g.* the "Cercles d'Etude," where all the burning questions of the day are discussed in a wild, revolutionary spirit. To establish associations on a totally different principle was one of the first things undertaken by the managers of the factory

in the Val-des-Bois. But they felt that community of interests, such *e.g.* as bind together the various members of a benefit club, is not sufficient, having only selfish ends in view. "An association does not become a civilising power until it is founded on the principle of mutual love," and the chief characteristics of such associations are that they proceed from a religious principle, that they try to work out the moral and material welfare of the members—in short, to use the words of Wordsworth, most aptly describing what is here aimed at—

> "Social life
> Through knowledge spreading and imperishable,
> As just in regulation and as pure
> As individual in the wise and good."

First and foremost comes the "Cercle Catholique d'Ouvriers" in the Val-des-Bois, a kind of Christian working-man's club for the purposes of recreation, the organization of fêtes, musical performances, theatricals, also of religious processions and other aids of the religious life and worship. The masters preside over the weekly meetings of its councils; but, in order to maintain independence in the expression of opinion, all decisions are arrived at by means of secret voting. In fact, these council meetings have been organized chiefly for the purpose of facilitating mutual intercourse between masters and men on the principle of Christian equality: "When one sees in the workman a brother of the Divine Carpenter of Nazareth the love felt for Him enables one to get over the most formidable obstacles;" and, again, "Our Catholic societies prefer plainness of speech; the heart here is open for all who can offer good advice." The members of the council become "apostles" among their comrades, and in their religious propaganda are aided by the Almoner and Director, who represent the ecclesiastical authority under which it is carried on. Corresponding to this association of men there is the association of St. Ann, consisting of "Christian Mothers," also holding their council meetings in such a way as not to interfere with home duties. The

ladies belonging to the employers' families preside over them, and there are corresponding ecclesiastical superiors to aid them in their charitable efforts for the promotion of the social and spiritual welfare of other women and children. There is an association of young girls—L'Association des Enfants de Marie, and of young children, L'Association des Saintes Anges, not to mention minor varieties, all of which form a network of societies, uniting the various members of the community for religious and social objects, to supplement the deficiencies of family life, but with no intention of substituting for it the common life of the association.

There is another organization, a "Service charitable," to render reciprocal services of kindness and sympathy to those who stand in need of it. Every Monday a "réunion de charité" takes place, consisting of ladies and house officers, to take into consideration cases of sickness and distress; every Tuesday a kind of working party, consisting of workwomen with a lady president, meet for the purpose of providing for nursing and tending the sick, or looking after babies when mothers are temporarily disabled by confinements or casualties —in short not only is everything done for the people, but a great deal is left for the people to do for themselves under the fostering care of the heads of the firm. The factory is being moralised, and attempts are made at the same time to increase material well-being among the employés, on the simple principle of mutual good-will. The patriarchal authority of the employer is not brought into conflict with the personal liberty of his people, and Christian equality and fraternity are recognised in all relationships between the heads and the hands engaged in the factory. The avowed objects of the *chefs d'industrie* throughout is not to gain popularity among the workpeople, or to win the esteem of their fellow-citizens in the vicinity. "All these ends would be unworthy of us; what we want to do is to increase the number of the children of God, ... and for this purpose we must transform our workers, to make of them men who will do their duty,

who will provide for themselves and their families, and be devoted to their children and those near them. We must fight egoism by supernatural devotion; luxury and the love of enjoyment by simplicity and a moderation of desire; sensualism and debauchery by Christian life and purity, that heavenly flower which perfumes human souls with its divine fragrance."

Nor let it be supposed that the economic side of the social problem is neglected in this model establishment. The "Christian Factory" is carried on on business principles, and it is called "La Corporation Chrétienne Ouvrière du Val-des-Bois, Religieuse et Economique." For this reason we will now turn to its purely economic institutions, to show that success in these is by no means incompatible with religious fervour and moral aims, although the "Manuel" lays it down as a general principle that "economic institutions, though necessary, in themselves have no moral force, they are like the body without the soul, and require the vivifying breath of charity."

A special council, called "Conseil Corporatif," consisting of the masters, the "Gardes de la Corporation," chosen conjointly by the masters and the men, and a few foremen and others selected on account of their business capacity, all being members of the "cercle," occupies itself with questions affecting the family, work, the purchase of necessaries, and methods for making provision for future contingencies. Its main object is, however, to cement the homogeneity and harmonious co-operation of all the members of the establishment. Here discussions are raised as to the purchase and sale of goods and measures of administration, as to the nomination and appointment of new employés, as to general expenditure and such-like economic questions. The effect produced is not unlike that of Conciliation Courts in England, where masters and men meet round the same table, and where unreserved discussion on both sides leads to absolute confidence. Whilst the Harmels thus delegate much of their power to subordinates, and share it with them as on an equal foot-

ing—objecting on principle to centralized authority or bureaucracy, which they regard in the light of "social materialism," they maintain, without difficulty, their sovereign rights as masters, though they were inclined to regard them as a spiritual trust rather than as a temporal right. Theirs may be said to be a limited industrial monarchy, and themselves to be rulers by the grace of God, whilst the consultative bodies they call in to share their own responsibilities save them from many troubles which are inseparable from absolute government. In short, the corporation is a religious and economic society, formed voluntarily by the heads of families connected with the industrial enterprise, and administered with the concurrence, and for the good of, the employed. The purely economic institutions for getting and spending and laying up in store for future use, such as the Mutual Assurance Society, savings-bank, co-operative flour and bread company, and others, have for their main object restful contentment, rather than providing merely the means of augmented material enjoyment. "The social question is not only a question of nourishment, shelter, and clothing, it is above all things a question of peace of mind; what is important is not so much that the labourer should be more or less rich, but that he should be contented with his lot." Now there is nothing more likely to produce this temper of mind than a comparative security against unforeseen contingencies, such as being thrown out of work by a commercial crisis, or becoming incapacitated for work by illness and growing infirmities in old age, or the dark possibility of sudden death, which often leaves a large family unprovided for. Under the able management of the Harmels, every opportunity is offered to their employés to make provision against such possibilities if inclined to do so. The advantages of the benefit society, savings-bank, and distribution stores are offered on the spot, and on the security of the firm, without infringing on the liberties of the members. In the latter respect the community compares favourably with the familistère of M. Godin: "The good done here," says a

private correspondent of the present writer, referring to what he had seen on the spot, "is not the carrying out of certain very sage principles, as is the case with M. Godin, and the manufacture of certain more or less contented and flourishing human automatons, but rather the establishment of a working example of human sympathy and kindly mutual forbearance, acting as the chief motive sentiment of an industrial group—'never mind elaborate systems but love one another'—is the beginning and the end of the Harmel philosophy."

Let us glance at a few of the results of this method of increasing thrift and foresight. There were, according to the last report published in 1886, 646 members belonging to the Mutual Benefit Society, whose deposits amounted to 7,605 francs 75 centimes for the previous year.

The Savings-bank, founded on the principle that if you make labourers *petits rentiers* you will succeed in moralising them—"though it is not the economy which makes them moral, but the morality which makes them economical"—had at the same date deposits from 129 adults and 206 juveniles, with an aggregate sum total of nearly 60,000 francs. By a peculiar arrangement a bonus of 5 per cent. is received by all purchasers of articles of consumption bought by the firm direct and from favoured tradesmen, and sold again in retail to the working people. A bonus of seven-eighths of net profits is paid to members of the "Corporative" Society, and the proceeds of both are held in reserve for them to accumulate as savings, and payable on their fiftieth birthday, or to their survivors should they die before attaining it. About 159 families were interested at the time of the last report in this fund with an amount of 3,564 francs 35 centimes to their credit. It may be as well to add the following figures:—Out of the whole number of working people, representing with their families from 800 to 900 persons in this "Corporation Chrétienne," there were 472 who made use of the three available forms of laying up savings; that 63,203 francs 15 centimes were put aside in this manner

out of 509,354 francs wages received, or 12·50 per cent., and that the percentage of both depositors and deposits has been steadily increasing. The sum total of the "Corporative bonus" paid to purchasing members *pro ratâ* on articles of consumption either furnished by the favoured tradesmen, or bought direct by the Corporation, from 1875 to 1885, amounted to over 49,280 francs 55 centimes, *i.e.* an average of nearly 5,000 francs per annum.

Not to weary the reader with too many details, we omit statistics referring to minor institutions, and pass over others of an educational and benevolent character to conclude our account in the words of M. Léon Harmel, giving the experience of the masters in thus dealing with their men on the combined principle of patronage and free co-operation: "We have found in these simple natures, under an outside crust, sometimes a little rough, loyal souls, capable of great devotion. The union of employers and employed in the source of their benefits; the time we consecrate to these efforts and the pecuniary sacrifice which they imply, are they not sufficiently compensated, speaking from an industrial point of view, by conscientious work, intelligent care, greater steadiness, and that kind of kindly understanding and confiding affectionateness which make the work of administration much more easy? Is it nothing to see frank looks and open faces, to live surrounded by men who love us, and whilst loving, respect us sincerely and with genuine devotion?"

M. Léon Harmel has lately visited some towns of the South and South-west of France to promulgate his views there among the employers of labour. Well might he point to the dreadful scenes, like that of the murder of M. Watrin at the mining works at Decazeville, where some ten thousand "hands" rose in insurrection two years ago and kicked and trampled the sub-manager to death, an atrocity which M. Basly, a working man's representative in the Chamber of Deputies, characterized as an act of execution on tyrants; well might he point to other similar disturbances at Menceaux-les-Mines, at Lyons,

and more recently at Vierzon, all of comparatively recent occurrence, and say: Look on this picture and look on that; contrast the peace and amity in our establishment with the sad dissensions and disputes elsewhere, and you will agree with me that as the gulf which separates classes widens every year, and hatred bred by selfish greed multiplies discontent on every side, nothing but the Christian spirit penetrating the masses from above can preserve society from the abyss. "The revolution has no other weapons but those of force . . . we have no other but conscience; liberty is our primary instrument, and the Christian Corporation shall give to the labourers that kind of independence which they vainly seek to attain by revolutionary methods . . . When these Corporations shall have become more numerous we shall have inaugurated the resurrection of France, we shall have saved our country by the Christian organization of labour."

This strong belief in the divine mission of "La grande Industrie" is very remarkable in the present religious condition of France, nor has it failed in stimulating other employers of labour to adopt the principle of the "Christian factory." There are at present no less than eight hundred manufacturers members of the Industrial Commission connected with the "Œuvre des Cercles Catholiques Ouvriers," with which the Harmel factory and its associations are affiliated, and of which le Comte de Mun is the general secretary. It may be said, and M. de Haussonville, referring to these efforts in his recent articles on the *Combat contre la Misère* has said it in so many words, that the attempt to return to the mediæval corporation, as a form of modern industry, is an anachronism. But to restore what was good in the spirit of these institutions, and to replace the present inadequate system of free contract between employer and employed by something like a "bargain between Christian partners," and in something better than purely money considerations, is not quite impossible. Pious masters, acting on religious principle, may do much towards restoring something like a patriarchal relationship between themselves and their

working people; and so, too, may those masters who themselves lack faith, but have charity, and in whom a high sense of duty or conscientious regard to social obligation supplies ethical fervour in the place of religious enthusiasm. These will carry with them, or succeed in eliminating gradually, that lower residuum of employers who take the simply business point of view. Even these, persuaded by such examples as that in the Val-des-Bois, learn that a humane organization of labour has peculiar advantages of its own, though it may lessen the margin of profit at times. People cannot have their cake and eat it too. Sir William Sidney Smith could not quench his own thirst with the cooling beverage in the bottle he tendered to the dying soldier on the field of Acre; but then, had he done so, one noble deed less would have been recorded in the world's history. So, too, those employers who, like *le bon père* in the Val-des-Bois, follow a high calling of social duty in sacrificing personal ease and economy in liberally providing for the material and moral welfare of their subordinates, will at least deserve and earn the distinction of benefactors of humanity. Papal briefs, episcopal letters of commendation, and even royal words of encouragement like those received by the managers of the model factory of late years, congratulating them on their success in changing hatred and dissension into mutual affection in the practical application of the "social doctrine," are a proof of this. But more telling than these complimentary epistles, and more touching, is the testimony of the men themselves who have participated in the benefits of the "Christian factory."

On Monday, March the 3rd, 1884, and in the eighty-ninth year of his life, Jacques Joseph Harmel, *le bon père*, died, and sad and sincere were the manifestations of mourning in the Val-des-Bois. During the last week of his life small groups of his old workmen were admitted into his presence and blessed by him. Once more, on the Sunday following, he expressed a desire to give his final benediction to the working family, represented by the Conseil Intérieur. To the very last

he thus remained true to his character of a father in the exercise of his parental authority over his industrial family. On the day of the funeral garlands of flowers covered his coffin, placed there by the work-people, who also carried him to his last resting-place. Nearly two thousand people followed the funeral, many of them former employés, who had left the factory years before, and came from long distances, and at considerable expense of time and money, to pay the last tribute of esteem to their former patron. The following sentence, extracted from his last will and testament, explains the reason of this undying affection of the men for their master: "Love your work-people; they were my children. You will be their father in my place; you will continue to bring them towards God and do them good."

Such was the work and such were the words of what may truly be called a model employer of labour. The industrial world would be none the worse if there were many more like him.