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"Le Blé Qui Lève"*

The labour troubles which have long agitated the cities and large towns of France have latterly made their appearance in the French country. In several sections the day-labourers of the rural communities, stimulated by the example or incited by the direct propaganda of the labourers of the urban communities, and incensed by a number of untoward local conditions (particularly by the very real prejudice the general adoption of machinery by the large farmers has caused them), have organised rural labour unions. Furthermore, these unions have indulged in demonstrations of class hatred, which have yielded nothing in bitterness and violence to the kindred manifestations of the labour unions of the towns. The rural unions, like the urban unions, have been rash, insolent, intolerant, unjust. They have mouthed the same tirades, have been consumed with the same feverish desire of change for the sake of change, have been afflicted with the same mania for petty politics, and have practiced the same tyranny. They have been enfeebled by the same jealousies and rent asunder by the same factional fights. And yet, by virtue, no doubt, of their greater closeness to nature, the rural unions possess a certain elemental dignity which the urban unions lack.

This agrarian upheaval, which by reason of its relative newness and its remoteness from the interests and activities of the capital, has been little exploited thus far in French literature, has found its adequate romancer in René Bazin, an Academician who has to his credit a long series of works remarkable for their affectionate and faithful portrayal of the more significant phases of French rural life. *Le Blé Qui Lève*, M. Bazin's latest work, centres about the varied undertakings of the Wood-cutters' Union of the village of Fonteneilles, near Corbigny, in the central department of La Nièvre.

"In the year 1891, and the two years following, the wood-cutters of La Nièvre leagued together to obtain an increase of their insufficient wages. In the woods,

*Le Blé Qui Lève. By René Bazin. Paris: Calmann-Lévy. 3 fr. 50.

during the loafing hours, in the cabarets, Sundays, and on the farms, where the labourers were brought together in large numbers by the threshing-machines, which had replaced the flails, they discussed the interests of their trade. Sounds which had not been heard for over a century mounted from under the copses or from between the hedgerows. Certain very old trees had been thrilled formerly by the passage of similar sounds. . . . 'Living,' 'life,' 'the child,' 'the home,' these primitive and significant words swelled the hearts of the men; and when they were through talking of their poverty they hurled defiant threats at the exploiters who lived at Nevers, or in the small towns, or in the open country, in houses built with the profit of the trees they had felled. Other words were uttered and dreams were recounted, in which all did not believe equally, but which entered the blood of all, for they were in the very air with its odours of young buds and springing herbs. In these dreams the following phrases appeared and reappeared: 'The future belongs to the people.' 'Democracy will create a new world.' 'The right to bread, the right to a pension, the right to share.' That year the forest was agitated. The saplings, periodically cut, murmured under the oaks, saying: 'We, as well as the big trees, have a right to the breezes of the upper air.'"

The hero of this uprising, the woodcutter, Gilbert Cloquet, one of the founders of the union and its first president, had a strong affection for the soil and was possessed by a great yearning for justice (as he understood it). It was not long before this instinctive, uncompromising desire for justice, which constrained him to prevent the pillaging of the house of a lumber dealer (with whom the union had had difficulties) and to intervene when certain non-unionists were being roughly handled by strikers, had cost him his popularity with his fellow-unionists and his position as president of the union. The time came, moreover, when he was beaten nearly to death by his associates because he insisted on doing a piece of work which he had agreed to do, and which, according even to the rigid rules of his union, he had a perfect right to do. His loyalty to his union was in no wise shaken by this disillusionising experience.

Being driven by a succession of family misfortunes to seek forgetfulness amid new surroundings, Gilbert Cloquet became an ox-herd on a farm in Picardie. A jovial and pious butcher of that region, who pitied him because of his sorrows, persuaded him to spend a few days in a religious retreat in Belgium. There the Christian ideal in all its fulness was revealed to him. Emerging thence a Christian Socialist, he returned to Fonteneilles, full of courage and hope, resolved to devote his declining years to imposing his new ideal upon the union of Fonteneilles, which he still loved.

Cloquet's hope of re-establishing social peace through the return of the rural labourers to the faith and practice of the fathers from which they have backslid is symbolised by the title of the novel, *Le Blé Qui Lève.*

At a time when religion, unless it be the sensuous Christianity "brightened by profane adornments" of Huysmans, the "somewhat attenuated Neo-Christianity" of Vicomte de Vogüé and Paul Desjardins, or the pious preciosity of Jules Lemaître, is esteemed hopelessly old-fashioned in France, it is refreshing to find an author—not of the least—to whom traditional Christianity is so far a vital reality that he would prescribe it without embellishment, modification or apology for one of the most complicated problems of modern society. Nevertheless, the most religiously inclined person may be excused for feeling a bit dubious regarding the practical application of M. Bazin's remedy. It is just possible that M. Bazin himself has some misgivings in the matter. At any rate, he terminates his novel just as Gilbert Cloquet's interesting social experiment is about to be subjected to a conclusive test.

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