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Miners Speak

Henry Poulaille

July 1, 1933

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In this anthology of proletarian literature that we will be attempting every month, it seemed to us that front stage should be occupied by the most difficult, the most dangerous, the least perfectly known of professions, despite books and films that strive to be as honest as possible. Of the works dedicated to the mines Zola's *Germinal* and G.W. Pabst's film *Kameradschaft* are probably the most remarkable among those given us by literature and cinema. But it must be said that as much as they differ from Malot's stories and the trickery of the bourgeois cinema, these works bespeak more an effort to understand that subject than they are authentic expressions of it. A verbal or a visual symphony, these works describe the subject from without. To be sure, Zola and Pabst attempted to put themselves in the place of the characters to whom they gave life, and certain tableaux are shockingly true. Without a doubt it is only right to place the sober and beautiful novel by Pierre Hubermont, *Treize Hommes dans le Mine*, right behind these novels. It is also appropriate to mention the poems in the *cht'i* northern patois of Jules Mousseron, both perfect in themselves, and one can see in these still literary transpositions an accent Zola did not render, or else drowned beneath his lyricism.

The same accent can be heard in the Belge Jean-Louis Vandermaesen, as well as in the American poem and the Negro chain gang song we quote. It is clearer in the Belgians Louis Gérin and Constant Malva, and the Scotsman Joe Corrie. In the latter it's a kind of cry, in the young Gérin – he's nineteen years old – his first novel *Une femme dans le mine* is a book that's already two years old! In Gérin it's a touching, stifled resentment, and it's impossible to read these pages without feeling a pang of heartbreak, for these men are sentenced to hard labor in a subterranean hell. It is in taking these things into account that their imperfections as writers and the bitterness in the tone of their tales, poems and plays must be judged. There is perhaps something unexpected about this. From the bowels of the earth rises the voice of the workers. It is perhaps Corrie alone who has given a full idea of what is possible. Gérin is full of vigor and he will no doubt be spoken of again. Malva's oeuvre is being graduallu constructed and in it it is the very voice of the mine we hear: Constant Malva speaks a gallery digger without artifice, without literary effects. He is in the heart of the mine, a thousand meters and then some above *salonnard* and populist literature. And perhaps these Corries, Malvas, Gérins, and Stephen Peters are outside literature if we persist in wanting literature to remain in the furrows dug by the scribbling flunkies who, like parasites, lived off its name. But as expressions of class, as testimony of a crushing task, outside or within literature, these voices cannot not be heard.

This is no more the realm of play, but that of life itself, of the difficult life, the dangerous life of the miner that these new amateurs expose and explain.