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To François Coppée

To be on strike without having ever been an industrial worker can seem, at first sight, quite paradoxical. But if I haven't got a taste of a factory, it is because of the bosses who haven't hired me the day before yesterday.

I wished to know, technically, the cause and the goal of this strike; to know, through experience rather than hearsay, the bitterness, the harsh realities of this job, the name of which amused Paris; to realise, at last, the sum of endurance, tiredness, which a creature has to provide in order to earn just enough not to die – and start again the next day!

To go there as a "lady", even as a friend, notebook and pencil in hands, a reporter among reporters, was to risk knowing maybe less than them; in any case, not to be able to do more, to remain parked in the same circle of evolution, in the same order of ideas.

The work of a journalist is, unfortunately, an official position, in such cases; which, without decreasing its interest, often makes it sterile. Whatever the rank of the informer in their professional hierarchy, it is known, it has to be told – hence, inferior. The two

opposite sides only tell them what they wish to tell them; only let them see what they wish to let them see.

While the ideal thing would be to be ignored, anonymous, so much like anybody that no-one would suspect you; so mixed into the crowd, so close to its heart that they can truly feel it beat, only by putting their hand on their own chest… a flow incorporated into the Ocean, a sigh mixed in the great breath of humankind!

For labour issues, especially, this seems useful in my opinion. To describe workers' lives is not enough – you must live it, in order truly to appreciate all its injustice and all its horrors. Then, we know what we are talking about; we are truly the echo of what we heard, the reflection of what we saw; we are soaked to the bone in pity and revolt!

To pretend, even with the best intentions, the most talent in the world, will only ever give this impression of honesty which an uncultured being sometimes obtains when they reproduce barbarously what they witnessed or took part in.

There is no need to spend years, months, weeks, to this study, to this neighbourhood, to this trial, as long as there is no question of studying the subtleties of the job, to become apt to deserve our wage – or, like in Russia, to catechise ignorant souls.

Our workers know how to think without a master; and the iniquities they suffer are so obvious (and, alas, so monotonous) that only a few hours suffice, for whom knows how to see them and hear them, to record them.

This is what I did. For almost a day, among these poor girls, dressed like them, I wandered under the scrutiny of the cops in front of the deserted factory, in the dreary comradeship of unusual idleness. I stopped at their stages; I heard their demands freely formulated; I went into the factories, saw the work of those who were submissive – who had too many children or were too hungry! – and that is why I can now tell you, in full knowledge, what this strike is about, and how much sympathy and interest it deserves.

And I suddenly think back of a visit I paid, a long time ago, to the Vaux-Fouquet castle, this royal residence of a royal superintendent, and which Mr. Sommier now owns. I think of the statues in the bowers, of the freshness of the undergrowth, of the marvellous shade, of all this well-being, all this luxury, all these pleasures as an art collector, turning these ruins in such a home.

Those poor girls are right; people cannot be merciless with such satisfactions in this world.

Outside, the delegates meet me.

> "We just went on the last delegation to the boss. Even to split the difference, and give us 55 centimes, he won't hear of it."

One of them is crying:

> "What's wrong with you?"
>
> "He was cold as ice… He spoke to us so harshly!"
>
> "And what is the reason for this refusal?"
>
> "Mr. Sommier said like this that ha cannot, that he can't afford it."

On the destitution of your master, cry, nymphs of Vaux! It makes many more cry, this poverty which shrinks salaries and moves into palaces; which makes so many young children, old mothers, exhausted women, slowly die in one of our neighbourhoods.

First of all, the word is misleading: We shouldn't say "breaker" but "organiser", since the task consists in layering, in cardboard or wooden boxes, the sugar cut into stronger or less strong morsels, according to their number. In this way, the sugar for the cafés are 50, while the bis, cut into cubes, is especially reserved for use in the Midi. Only the refuse, the powder and shards, sold by weight, does not need to be aligned.

[…]

In ordder to understand what the "cassoir" is, you must imagine a big, very long table, around a metre wide, with parallel drain, like the lines of a music score in relief for blind people. It is between these rails that the sugar is going to go past – as an ingot before the knives, then as morsels – which the six organisers, in a continuous, unceasing, mechanical movement too, pick up a line, turn around, put it in the box placed behind them on some sort of wooden bench; they turn back, start again, forever, eternally, from seven in the morning to six in the evening, without rest, without ever sitting down, apart from ten minutes of break and an hour for lunch.

For example, they circulate. When their box is full, they must carry them to the scales, placed, at Mr. Sommier's place for example, 20 or 25 metres away. The average number of journeys per day is 40. Pregnant women, young girls carry up to a thousand kilos. Many are injured; the hardiest lose on average two to three days per fortnight, because of faintness, exhaustion, stiffness, aches in their sides, problems with their pregnancy or their puberty.

I am only speaking here of the physical effort of it, because you need to read, as I just did, in medical books, to know which diseases are linked to this unfortunate lot.

They have no more nails, no more teeth; the first were used to the flesh by the handling of the sugar; the latter lost their enamel, fell, broke because of the dust which comes out – this dust which burn their eyelids, their throats; which makes their voices coarse; causes stomach infections, tuberculosis – suffering always, and an early death!

How much do they earn? They used to get 60 centimes per 100 kilos, that is, depending on their courage, from 3 fr. 25 to 4 fr per day. They have been told, almost a fortnight ago: "You will now only receive 50 centimes for 100 kilos. Competition is too harsh; take it or leave it."

They left; they got out, preferring to starve completely, and quickly, than to slowly die from this. Because this meant a 10 centimes decrease per day – and you realise what 10 centimes a day mean in a workers' household?

They tried a general strike. The workers from the Lebaudy, Lucas, and François companies first followed the movement started by the Sommier refinery. Then they grew wary… went back. Only the workers from Lucas's place, men and women, sacrifice 15 centimes a day to support the Sommier's strikers. But there are less than twenty of them – and there are over 140 people on strike!

A little help arrived, from here and there, sent by plebeian solidarity, or the compassion of some people who were moved by so much distress and so much bravery. They were able to distribute 30 centimes a day; and families of five, six people lived with this on bread and water – but still not giving up!

I went to meet with them on Monday, at dawn, at the top of the rue de Flandre. The day before, three delegates had come to find me, to tell me what I wrote earlier; and as I had mentioned my idea to spend a day there, to get hired if possible, they were enthusiastic at this prospect, if slightly sceptical as to its implementation.

However the "secretary", Hélène Milani, a tall blond woman with confident eyes, a gallant air, had told me: "See you tomorrow!" But she had added: "You will never manage, Madame," which had upset me. I am not a wimp, and what I want, I get.

Therefore, there I was, showing up at one of their homes, at the given time. In a second, I took off my gloves, veil, hat, coat, and there I am bare headed, hairs pulled-back – ha, this damn hair! How they rebel! – in a cloth petticoat and blouse, an apron around

As soon as she said this, I went; the plan was executed step by step. I sneaked past the caretaker, and, presto, stumbled down into the cellar. At the entrance, I almost fainted, because of how high the temperature was. Men in cloth trousers, bare chested, their breasts and stomachs protected by some kind of currier's apron walk past in a line, with a huge copper container in their arms, which they empty, one after the other, in the machine where the loaf moulds are. It is the molten sugar they are carrying; you must see their bored gestures, when they have versed their charge and go get another one in their metal vases! And these foolish painters who insist on painting the Danaids, while these flesh and blood creatures here give such a spectacle of art, superb and pitiful!

All around, like a huge bombshell factory, the moulds are lined up one against the other, pointing downwards.

However, I daren't shout "Hey! Barthélémy!". I inquire instead.

"Don't know him!" the first one answers.

"Wait a minute…" another one says "But it's Jughead!"

"Hey! Jughead!" repeats the whole floor in a single voice.

A tall curly haired boy, with a good natured air emerges from the depths.

"Who is calling for me?"

"It's you girl who's bringing you a litre."

"That's not my girl, but I'll take the litre anyway."

I handed it to him with a smile:

"It's from Eulalie!"

"Tell her I thank her. And you too, miss."

"Goodbye, Mr. Barthélémy."

As I left, I wandered a bit. I look at the beautiful layout of the factory, I calculate what source of wealth these buildings, these machines, this powerful organisation of Capital represent.

"I have enough people for today. Come back tomorrow at six, you will be hired."

I put the employment book borrowed for the occasion from my stepsister, and we leave, across the courtyard, meeting the workers who are coming back.

At the gate, a striking woman, come to watch for defections, calls out to me:

"You lazy cow!"

Certainly not.

All I have left to do is to attempt to get into Mr. Sommier's, to catch a glimpse of the building.

"There's only one way: you have to bring a litre to Barthélémy!"

I don't mind giving Barthélémy a litre, but I would have to know how.

"Here. Barthélémy is a basin carrier at the refinery, under the place where we usually work. Bassin carriers never come out; they are brought what they need from outside, until three. My man took him his lunch, but we can still bring him a litre."

"How would I do that?"

"You go under the doorman's nose without talking to him, walk straight across the courtyard, down a few steps, and there, in the cellar, you'll find the basin carriers. Then you shout "Hey! Barthélémy!" And you will have seen how hard their job is, too, and how hot it is down there!"

my waist, a basket in hand, so similar to any of them that they start gushing about it, amused.

We walked down the rue de Flandre, up unto the great building of the Sommier refinery, to see whether they are hiring. I will sneak into the group of renegades, even if I get a bit "pushed around" by the strikers I came to defend.

The street is full of policemen, in and out of uniform. I am only afraid of Granger, the member of parliament for this part of Paris, who is there, with Lhermitte, from the Trade Union Hall, and my colleague Degay, from La Marseillaise. The three of them came because, the other day, the police had been really brutal, and, in case of a repeat offence, Granger would show his credentials.

If they recognised me, maybe they could not contain a sign of surprise, and my cover which should let me come and go as I wish to talk with my friends would be blown.

Gatherings are banned; if there are more than three of us and we are standing still, a policeman intervenes. And as I am lingering in front of the factory gates, observing every brick of it, contemplating the doorman in his pretty, blue uniform with its metal buttons, looking like a grunt, with his terrible white moustache, who seems rather flattered by my examination, a cop gently pushes me:

"On you go, honey! Move away! You shouldn't stay here."

I obtemperate and take refuge, with many others, at "our" office, located opposite, at number 122 at the wine seller's which is called "Let's go to Charles's".

I go to Charles's. We walk to the bar, where a few workers and many snitches are having a drink, and we meet at the back, in a sort of modest hall lit from above, half dancing-room, half palm game court… like a century ago! Only, thank goodness, no-one is giving a speech; we are simply discussing, without sentences, what would be the best thing to do in our common interest.

The fact that I am new does not alert them – one of the delegates, Mrs. Gasse, vouched for me – and I observe once more, with inexpressible emotion, how much naïve goodness, sweetness, resolve these despised, exploited people have (among its women especially). No, or very few, angered words, only melancholy to see how hard it is to agree on things, and, despite everything, the hope to achieve it.

> "We weren't demanding anything; only to be given back what they took from us… Mr. Sommier is not bad, he will agree: he is so rich!… How boring it is not to work, when you're not used to it!"

It is true, they are like bodies without souls, these good workers, although, between ther fingers, a bone hook crochets some wool. On a small table, there is an inkwell, some paper, a wooden box, a registrar. From time to time, a striker shows up, signs, gets her 30 centimes – then leaves clutching at them, like a drowning man holds onto a branch! She does not stop, does not talk, runs… people are waiting for her for their food!

These poor emaciated faces, with pale lips, with almost no pink at all In the palor of their flesh; the poor baggy eyes, poor creatures!

One of them, in a corner, has opened her camisole to offer her breast to a child who looks like an old man with such a wrinkly skin and a waxy countenance!

And the meagre breast appears, the speaking weapon of all this race, who is hungry before they have teeth, who is hungry once they have fallen out – who is hungry always!

One of my guides comes to pick me up:

> "At lunchtime, François's place is going to hire people, rue Ricquer. Are you coming with?"

I get up and follow her.

At François's, for this ten minutes' break, the staff escapes in a roar. Most of them are young (others being dead or retired), many are dressed in petticoats and camisoles, with light, flowery fabrics, a handkerchief tied around their heads, pointy corners flying in the wind on their hair iced with sugar. At first sight, it is almost pretty, under this clear September sunlight, like a flight of grisettes at the Porcherons.

But the illusion ceases in front of the broken smiles, the parched lips, the narrow shoulders, the sunken throats, the dry little coughs which break out all around. Whet had made these cheeks look red was the fire from a fever. As the droplets of sweat dry on the cheeks, the redness disappears from the cheeks. There they are pale like old dolls…

We have sneaked into the courtyard.

"There you go, here's the Vésinet," my friend tells me.

It is a dark cellar in which machines, human shapes, can vaguely be recognised.

> "What is this?"
>
> "That's where we work, but come above it, it's better."

Indeed, above a few steps, the room is well-lit, at least. But there's still this same crushing heat, same steam, same sugar dust, which asphyxiates you, suffocates you…

There are some "cassoirs" there; and the other one gives me a lessons on how it works, on what I would have had to do.

> "The only thing is," she says, "in the evening, your fingers would have pissed blood."

She indicates me with a glance the women's hands, rolled in towels, bandages, cuts of linen.

Here comes the foreman. Shyly, she addresses him, asks him her request. Looking away, but very politely, he answers: