

PEOPLE

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People by Pierre Hamp & James Whittall

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PIERRE HAMP & JAMES WHITALL

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BY
PIERRE HAMP

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION BY
JAMES WHITALL



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INTRODUCTION

ONE of the sketches in this volume, "Fat-Month," concerns an oven-man at a Paris pastry-shop. Fat-Month would, I think, have appeared to me with the robust plebeian countenance, the straggling black moustache, the quick brown eye of Pierre Hamp, even if I had not known that the author of "The Labour of Men" was once himself a pastry cook who, during off hours, read avidly in cheap copies of Victor Hugo by the light of a basement window. "Two things you must always care about: Justice and yer work," says the baker when he is discharged, to "Colossus," his tiny apprentice. That, in brief, is Hamp's whole philosophy. And I can see "Colossus," his overwhelming white sleeves tucked up from his grimy hands, gazing with unhappy longing after this friend of the miserable, this thick-set apostle of good work marching off so confidently into the future.

Hamp has indeed arrived at his place in French letters through the kind of material struggle which leaves most men voiceless and without hope. His great strength is that the struggle itself has made him articulate; his great originality, that in his evolution to intellectual power and expressiveness he has never

renounced his workman's heritage. Years as a pastry cook in France, England and Spain, followed, after a brief period of study, by years as a railway employee, and then by more years as a factory inspector in the textile north—this has been the substance of his life. He began to write of labourers as Conrad wrote of seamen; because he felt with them so passionately that he had to make some written record of their lives. His books, though not cast in autobiographic form, have the unmistakable quality of first-hand experience. Hamp is perhaps the only writer in any language who, rising from the "masses," has kept not only the unsentimental realism and the instinctive sympathies, but the muscles, the tough hide, and so to say the craft technique of the manual worker.

Zola might have conceived "Fish, Fresh Fish" ("Marée Fraîche"), the history of the lives involved in the conveyance of a fish from the Channel to the Paris restaurant. Anatole France might have written the sketch of the carpenter in "People," who, mending the bookshelf of a dramatic critic, learns with immoderate surprise and laughter that this gentleman earns his living by sitting in a theatre. But neither Zola, with his naturalism, nor France, with his delicate irony, could have given to the speech and thought of their working-class personages the tang, the poignant verity achieved by Hamp. He knows from having been inside their skins how the fishmonger, the carpenter,

the section-hand, the textile-worker feels, thinks, eats, loves, most significantly how he works—works and suffers and rebels from the increasingly machine-made civilization whose weight he carries on his back. The religion of the French craftsman of old was that nothing must be done unless it was well done, and Hamp's books are full of an almost lyrical celebration of the "irreplaceable" quality of technique which is being gradually displaced in modern life by automatic processes.

He sees his workmen not at all as Conrad sees his sailors. Not as isolated individuals with romantic or tragic destinies, but always as a part of a complex social and economic system, which exploits them, squeezes them dry. He measures them, as he has had to measure himself, by their producing power, and gauges their human happiness by their good or bad relation to their work. Before the war he sought in vain for happy workmen. During the war he found some. In fact the greatest virtue of the war, as Hamp the Socialist discovered it in "Le Travail Invincible" ("Labour the Invincible")—that very beautiful book which is chiefly a record of his inspections of factories in bombarded areas—was to make men love their work again. "Professional probity becomes the perfect form of patriotism." And yet Hamp does not oppose the mechanization of industry. His practical understanding reckons with all the consequences of