

VICTOR CHARBONNEL.

BY THEODORE STANTON.

A RUSSIAN writer has said: "When I read Zola's *Rome*, the Abbé Paul Fromant in that novel immediately reminded me of the Abbé Victor Charbonnel. Both are idealists, both true children of this agitated century, having dared, in their sublime *naïveté*, to dream of putting new blood and fresh life into the aged body and rigid forms of Roman Catholicism. They would also reconcile the Church with science, enlighten it with their vivifying torch and force it to advance. Both wrote books into which they put all their soul, and both looked to the Vatican as their guiding star. But time soon showed that their dreams were doomed to disappointment. There was, however, at least one difference between the two men. They did not enter the Church through the same door. Pierre Fromant began preparation for the priesthood from his earliest childhood, whereas Victor Charbonnel turned towards the same career only when he had reached the age of manhood."

Victor Charbonnel was born at Murat, in south central France, in 1863, so that he is still a comparatively young man. He was a law student at the Lyons University when, in 1880, was brought forward in Parliament the famous "Article 7," which prohibited the existence in France of unauthorised religious bodies. Up to that moment the idea of becoming a priest had never entered the head of the young Charbonnel. His father had always been indifferent to religious matters, and his mother, though pious, had never tried to influence her son, leaving his mind perfectly free to develop at its will. The decisive action came from without. When Jules Ferry's law was promulgated began what was considered by many minds to be a violent persecution of the Catholic clergy. The police closed the convents and scattered the monks to the four quarters of Europe. This policy appeared cruel and sacrilegious to

Victor Charbonnel and several of his student friends. To them, the persecuted and oppressed clergy became martyrs, and the young men stepped forth in defence of them and of the principle of liberty of conscience. They organised meetings of protest and delivered lectures and did all in their power to awaken public opinion against this abuse of power. The high-minded activity of these young men did not pass unnoticed by the Church, which now undertook to draw them within its circle. With this end in view, the most liberal and highly educated priests were delegated to bring them over. In this way Victor Charbonnel was prevailed upon in a moment of genuine enthusiasm to enter the priesthood.

But scarcely had Charbonnel taken orders when doubts began to rise in his mind, and when, later, he was brought into close contact with the Jesuits while a teacher at one of their great schools, his faith in the Church received its first severe shock. So he forthwith turned his back on the Jesuits, though still remaining a priest. He kept within the pale of the Church in the hopes of spreading about him more liberal ideas, thinking that the clergy and the faithful themselves would in the end welcome and strive after greater independence. But he soon found that such was not the case. "I could not succeed, he says, "in awakening any idea of independence, in starting a movement of conscience. It was only too evident that they did not wish to be delivered from the yoke, and I was at length convinced that it was useless to try and give light and air to the Catholic Church."

While in this uneasy and dissatisfied state of mind, news of the famous Parliament of Religions of Chicago reached the eager ears of the Abbé Charbonnel. It immediately appealed to his liberal mind, his large heart, and his vivid imagination, and he forthwith determined to bring about the assembling of a similar body at Paris during the International Exhibition of 1900.

The proposal was at first approved by the Catholic clergy of America and France, and was even looked upon with favor by the Pope himself. Cardinal Gibbons, who happened to be passing through France at this moment on his way to Rome, took upon himself to place in the hands of his Holiness the preliminary plan for the Congress drawn up by the Abbé; and the latter was informed that the document had been read by Leo XIII. and was received with marked signs of sympathy. Therefore the French archbishops and bishops began a vigorous attack upon the proposition and brought to bear great pressure on the Vatican, with the result that the Abbé Charbonnel soon found himself left in almost

absolute isolation, being abandoned by the high and low ecclesiastical dignitaries who had at first given him the warmest encouragement. This whole story is told by the Abbé in an interesting volume¹ which throws a flood of light on European Catholicism.

After a lecture tour in France, Belgium, Holland, Switzerland, and Scotland, where the Abbé explained his plan of a Congress, he returned to Paris last year convinced that the Catholic Church would never enter into the scheme as a Church. He then thought that the opposition might be disarmed if, instead of a Congress of Religions or of Churches, which had been his first idea, where each sect would enjoy official *representation*, the Congress should bring together all religious men, *representative* by their knowledge or their moral authority and under conditions which should assure complete individual independence. So he turned to the leading lay advocates of liberal Catholicism and put before them a very conciliatory declaration in which the aim and plan of the proposed Congress was given in its chief outlines. They approved the idea, the form, everything, in a word, connected with the undertaking, but dared not assume the responsibility of publicly putting their names at the bottom of the circular. They had consulted the ecclesiastic authorities and declined to act. "The determination of the Church," writes Abbé Charbonnel, "to turn a deaf ear to the new spirit of tolerance which showed itself at the Chicago Parliament of Religions and which might spread to the Old World, was now clearly evident; and it was also evident that we did not possess a body of liberal laymen capable of taking a bold initiative. In the meanwhile Cardinal Gibbons denied in a letter published in Paris that he had ever encouraged the friends of the movement here in favor of such a Congress. He repudiated, at the risk of repudiating his own conduct at Chicago, our enterprise, and our efforts. . . . To be supported by such men as Gibbons and Ireland, by the young Catholicism of America, had been my greatest hope.

¹ *Congrès Universel des Religions in 1900: Histoire d'une Idée*. Paris: Colin, 5 rue de Mézères. See also by the same author *Le Congrès des Religions et la Suisse*. Paris: Fischbacher, 33 rue de Seine. As might be expected, Abbé Charbonnel has secured, on the whole, warmer support in Switzerland than in his own France. He accuses Cardinal Gibbons of duplicity. In a long article on the proposed Congress, printed in the *Revue de Paris* of last September, the Abbé Charbonnel quoted the Cardinal as having not only approved of the enterprise, but as having said: "The Pope will be with you, that I know." Thereupon, the Cardinal wrote a letter to the editor of this periodical, which was published in the number for October 1, in which he denies having ever encouraged the Abbé and in which he especially declares that he never spoke the words about the Pope's support. But in the number—February 1—of the *Revue*, which appears just as I am sending off this article, M. Charbonnel returns to the attack and again asserts, supported this time by M. Bonet-Maury, Professor at the Paris Protestant Theological School, that what was said in the first article, even the remark concerning the Pope, is strictly and wholly true.

Abandoned by them, I had simply to recognise that I was beaten and to leave a Church where, for a man of my liberalism, there was nothing to do."

The matter stood thus when appeared Abbé Charbonnel's book, *La Volonté de Vivre*, which, though devoted to religious subjects, does so in such an exceedingly liberal manner—the author cites even the name and thoughts of Renan, that *bête noire* of Catholicism—that no priest could publish such a book and hope to go unpunished. He seemed to be well aware of this, for, whereas the title page of all his previous works bore the title of Abbé, this one was signed simply Victor Charbonnel. But this did not suffice to shield the author from ecclesiastic animadversion. He was soon given to understand that if a retraction were not sent to the Archbishop of Paris, he would be put on the retired list, to use a military phrase, and classed among the unfrocked priests. Victor Charbonnel would not suffer such an indignity, and so, with tears in his eyes, he sent a firm, kindly, and dignified letter, to the Archbishop of Paris, informing him of his intention to quit the Church. On the morrow the soutane was abandoned for the garb of the ordinary citizen.

A friend who visited Charbonnel two days later, reports: "So solemn was everything in his modest little apartment that I felt as if a dead body were in the house," and when I called on him two months afterwards I was struck by this same sadness of the atmosphere, especially when M. Charbonnel remarked: "In a few days I am going to start on a lecture tour. I should have done so earlier, but I wished to remain quiet for a period in order not to seem to have left the Church for the immediate purpose of attacking it."

To the friend already mentioned he said: "The crisis through which I have just passed is terrible. I do not know whether I am right or not. But my conscience would not permit me to act otherwise. I find consolation in the fact that I have left the Church without a scandal, that there has been no immorality in my life. I have no intention of marrying, and in the new field in which I am entering I shall try to be useful to humanity. I am cradled by no false hopes. I know that the position of an ex-priest is a hard one, for by discarding the soutane I lose prestige and authority. But I shall labor, I shall take up my pen, I may even go back to teaching. But of this be assured, the past is no more."

Here is the text of the letter which the Abbé Charbonnel wrote to the Archbishop: "In giving my life to the Church in the ar-

dent sincerity of my youth, I wished to give my life to God. But long and sad trials have brought me to this disappointing conviction that to serve the Church or the men among us who pretend to govern it, is not serving God. I cannot henceforth, without feeling arise in me a too painful reproach, preserve the appearance of solidarity with an ecclesiastical organisation which reduces religion to administrative cleverness, which makes it a source of domination, a means of intellectual and social oppression, a system for the exercise of intolerance instead of a prayer, an elevation of the heart, a searching after the divine ideal, a moral support, a principle of love and fraternity, which, in a word, causes it to become a common human policy, not a pure faith. For the sake of a free, honest conscience, and for the peace of my soul, I feel that I should inform your Eminence that I am no longer a priest, that I hereby sever my connexion with the Church."

This break with the Church has also severed Charbonnel's connexion with the proposed Congress of Religions, "for," as he said to me yesterday, "the Catholics will now have nothing to do with me." But it is probable that the enterprise will not be wholly abandoned, though considerably modified, and will pass into quite other hands. It will be taken up by the professors of religious sciences at the Sorbonne, and the gathering will resemble somewhat that held a little time ago at Stockholm. In a word, it will become a Congress of Religious Sciences rather than a Congress of Religions.

A few days after the dispatch of his letter to the Archbishop, M. Charbonnel wrote these lines in a newspaper article: "I could no longer, without blaming myself, abandon my faith, my humble devotion and all my soul to a Church which is simply an organised administration of pontiffs who proclaim themselves the sole masters of the word of Christ, using this organisation simply to give the appearance of truth to their injurious or ambitious lies and to produce, as is apparent to everybody, an intellectual enslavement, a moral nihilism, and social immobility in a world which has to be made entirely new again by means of an ideal, I might almost say, by a religion of charity and by fraternal justice. It is only too plain that this ideal, this religion for which all hearts yearn, has been driven from the Church by the pontiffs. Therefore have I had to abandon my old faith, to pluck from me my very soul, which act wounds more deeply and is more painful, as I know by the bitterness of my tears, than that death which takes from us the poor existence of this earth. I have blasted dreams, friendships,

recollections. I have bid a last farewell to what has so long been my very life, and I have started on my way, a pilgrim of the unknown and veritable God, who is not where I at first thought to find Him. . . .

“If I could have chosen my lot, I should probably not have chosen this one, surrounded by so much that is unpleasant. But it often happens that one no longer believes what one would like to believe, while one believes what one would like not to believe. It seems to me that the only law which should govern one’s conscience is a sincere and courageous conformation of one’s life to one’s thought. This is what I felt I was doing. Why should anybody wish that I should condemn myself for life to a lie and to hypocrisy by staying in the Church when I no longer believed in it? . . . In human affairs real progress is accomplished only through upheavals, destruction, death, whence springs the soul of the new generations. These heroes—Luther, Galileo, Pascal, Rousseau, Lamennais, and Tolstoi—have alone aided humanity to rise to a higher ideal of life.”

In another article he exclaims: “Why may not our soul and the soul of future humanity be like the happy river? Why, when finally delivered from the religious phantoms and terrors imposed upon it by the tragic or ridiculous fancies of dogma, may it not open to the vision of the wide heaven and to God who creates the order and supreme beauty of heaven? Why, having relegated to the land of shades the dead religions, may it not turn towards the living religion, whose ineluctable law, it knows, is written in the starry nights and in the heaven of the conscience? Why will it not recognise this religion which is a longing to live beyond our own nature, nearer to God than to ourselves, and which is, as a sage has said, only a ‘morality in infinity?’ Then would the existence of the soul be indeed the sweet, tranquil course of a river peacefully bearing the mirror of heaven on its bosom, along the immortal springtime of its banks.”

M. Victor Charbonnel has indeed turned his back on the Church and has boldly started out on a literary career. He is now a frequent contributor to the daily press. Articles from his pen appear almost monthly in the reviews. His name has already appeared on the title pages of several volumes. Two of these have been mentioned above. Another—*Volonté de Vivre*—is a lofty study of the problems of moral life, suffering, and death. In its pages he tells without passion, without criticism, without bitterness, but rather in a sort of veiled melancholy, how he has passed from Cath-

olic dogmatism to "the religion of the ideal," to the free Christianity of Channing and Tolstoi. This book has made no little stir in Romish centres, and more than one of the faithful deplore and regret the exile of its author.

Victor Charbonnel has a very large intelligence. His pen can write elegantly and with authority on other than purely moral and religious subjects. This is shown in his recent volume *Les Mystiques dans la Littérature Présente*, a series of delicately turned articles of literary criticism which appeared originally, if I am not mistaken, in the *Mercur de France*, and in which he gives the history of the origin, rise, and future, of the school of French mystics. "Ten years ago," he says, "every poet would have been called a Parnassian; every novelist, a naturalist; every thinker, a positivist. But little by little, the poets, novelists, and thinkers, become mystics," and he then goes on in a prettily printed little volume of some two hundred pages to tell us what modern mysticism is and who the modern mystics are. It is a work of pure literary criticism that brings out an entirely new and delightful side of the intellectual powers of Victor Charbonnel.

And still another gift of M. Charbonnel has already been hinted at. I refer to his oratorical powers, to his talents as a lecturer. This faculty reveals itself in his conversation. His thoughts are abundant and striking. His language is rich and flowing. He is eloquent even in his modest little study. I have never heard him lecture, but those who have tell me that he possesses the true fire of the born orator. It is natural, therefore, that he now intends to utilise still more than in the past this means of propagating his ideas and adding to his slender income. In fact he is now on the point of starting on a lecture tour through Belgium and Holland, and he has in mind, I believe, a lecture tour some day in the United States, and as his knowledge of our tongue—he cannot speak it but reads it—would enable him to commit in English his lecture or at least read it from his manuscript, the objection of a foreign language is removed. Under these conditions, I venture to predict that Victor Charbonnel would prove to be a successful lecturer in our country.

Perhaps it is not too much to say, therefore, that Victor Charbonnel is destined to place himself among the religious renovators of this century and that the future historian of the intellectual movement of Europe during the hundred years now drawing to an end will write his name alongside of those of Lamennais, Lacordaire, Montalembert, Hyacinthe Loyson, and Didon. It seems as if it would always be the fate of liberal Catholicism to fire with enthusiasm some noble souls, to provoke a grand, magnificent struggle, only to crush them and it under the oppression of absolutism and uncompromising orthodoxy. Victor Charbonnel is now entering upon the first stage of this hard battle, and he must often ask, as do his friends, whether it will end in victory or in defeat. *Qui vivra, verra.*