

THAT 'CONVENT SCANDAL'

THE FACTS OF THE CASE.

A few weeks ago we dealt at some length, in our editorial columns, with the cabled statement that one Mdle. Lecoanet, an 'orphan,' had taken successful action against the Good Shepherd nuns at Nancy, France, for over-work and cruelty. The 'orphan' in question is 48 years old, having been born in 1855. In June, 1871 she was placed by her grandmother in the convent, where she remained six years. She then left for a short time—but, of her own free will, returned and remained there for 11 years. It was only some three years ago—in 1900—that she complained of overwork, and consequent injury to her sight, and, under sinister influences, brought an action that was decided against her by the local tribunal. Under existing circumstances in France it is (as the 'W.A. Record' points out) perhaps, not inconsistent that, in a case where a religious community is concerned, an adverse verdict should be now given, as in the instance in question, as M. Combes is casting around for a pretext to include the Magdalen asylums in his drag-net legislation of proscription and persecution against the Catholic charitable institutions in the country.

The whole

Squalid Story

of those charges, which have been revived by Combes and the French infidel Press and their English echoes, is told as follows in a recent issue of the 'Glasgow Observer':—

To begin with, it is 10 years since this question arose, the date being 1893. Those who want the fullest particulars of the whole matter will find them in 'The Month' for June 1900, where Father Sydney Smith, S.J., in an article entitled 'Good Shepherds and their Accusers,' relates and discusses the whole affair.

The trouble began with the appointment of a new chaplain to the convent about the year mentioned, 1893. This chaplain seems to have got to loggerheads with the Sisters, and when matters were brought before the Bishop, who appointed the chaplain, the Bishop took the chaplain's part, and declined either to recall him or compel him to promote the harmony of the establishment.

Now a word or two retrospectively. The Convent of the Good Shepherd at Nancy was founded in 1835. Until 1893 the succeeding bishops of the diocese all regarded the convent with approval. This may be said of Mgr. Turinaz, the present Bishop, at least up till 1893. The chaplain appointed by the Bishop in 1893 had singular ideas of a chaplain's duties. He is charged with having generally fostered insubordination on the part of the inmates towards the Sisters, and it was out of the charges and counter charges laid before the ecclesiastical authorities of Rome that the present slander arose. It may be said here that there is no warrant for the inference that the charges against the convent were accepted as proved at Rome because they appeared in the Roman publication called 'Analecta Ecclesiastica.' This publication is nothing more nor less than a record of the decisions of the Holy See, and any statement of evidence printed in it is no more to be taken as evidence of accepted fact than would be the case of evidence in the 'Law Times' or in any other record of English judicial proceedings. In the pages of 'Analecta Ecclesiastica' the charges remained until in 1899 they were

Dug out for Circulation

in a French paper called the 'Aurore,' which was engaged in a general attack on all Catholic Orders, monastic and conventual, and which was, therefore, on the hunt for any statement, true or false, which would further its purpose.

Father Sydney Smith takes the charges against the nuns one by one.

First, it is alleged that the Sisters 'exploit' their penitents, and make vast sums of money out of their labor. Bishop Turinaz complained that inmates who had been working for five, ten, or twenty years in the Good Shepherd Convent were turned out of doors without resource and without funds. To this charge the Sisters make answer, and say that their institution is not a factory run for gain, that the inmates are recruited from the ranks of unfortunate girls rescued from lives of debauchery in the streets, who have little or no skill when they enter the convent, and that, therefore, their labor is fully remunerated by the shelter, clothing, and maintenance given to them. Very few of them remain so long as twenty, ten, or even five years in the convent. It is not the method of the Good Shepherd Sisterhood that the penitents should so remain, unless the spiritual welfare absolutely demands it. The Sisters rescue the girls, train them to a life of virtue and industry, and then place them out in situations obtained for them where they still are in touch with the convent, and free to return should necessity arise. The Sisters estimate that in their convents where work is plenty the profit accruing to the community doesn't exceed an average per head of half a franc a day (about 4½d.), and the institution is run, not as a means of providing remunerative occupation for an odd skilled inmate here and there, but for the purpose of providing all the inmates with a shelter and maintenance. Even if the Sisters were able to maintain their penitents and still to pay them some-

thing for the labor, it would be most unwise to do such a thing. The

Penitents Enter Voluntarily,

and they are free to leave when they will. But they are encouraged to stay until they have thoroughly reformed their lives and until situations can be found for them. It would be a very bad thing to hand over to girls in such circumstances money which they have no means of spending, because the accumulation of it would sooner or later tempt them to return to the streets, from which they had been rescued, and to spend the money in drink, which, in many cases, is the cause of their fall.

The Bishop charged the Sisters with spending too much money in building their convent and chapel. This is entirely a matter of opinion. The reply of the nuns is that the sum (£12,000) is not extravagant for a building designed to hold more than 200 persons separated in various categories, each category demanding segregation from the other.

The Sisters deny, in toto, that they send girls away after five, ten, or twenty years' service. Of course, if any inmate turns insubordinate she must be dismissed, but that is not a rule particular to the Good Shepherd convents, but common to all charitable institutions of all denominations everywhere. Such cases are very infrequent, and have rarely arisen, except in 1893, when there was a general insubordination from reasons already described. Otherwise it has very seldom happened that inmates have been discharged from the Good Shepherd Convent in Nancy. Perhaps the

Most Serious

of the accusations was that young girls, or a great number of them, had been compelled to work 'every day longer than the civil law permits.' Twelve and sometimes fifteen hours a day were the periods stated. To this the nuns make answer that their inmates have eight hours' sleep in summer and eight and a half in winter. Added to this they hear Mass, they have breakfast, dinner, and supper, the two chief meals being followed by an hour's recreation each. There are also morning and evening prayers, and they have religious instruction and Benediction daily, so it is quite clear that for the Bishop's charges there is no foundation.

The whole matter was discussed in the French Chamber of Deputies on the 28th of November, 1899, the subject being brought forward by M. Fourniere, a Socialist. The Abbe Lemire gave a trenchant and crushing answer to the calumnies advanced by the Socialist deputy. The Abbe pointed out that the Archbishops of Rheims and Paris had given emphatic denials to accusations made against Good Shepherd Convents in their dioceses, and he went on to state the unanswerable fact that the Good Shepherd Convent at Nancy had received in 1898 a silver gilt medal and a special expression of gratitude from the State authorities in France. The official report ran:—

'During the last 63 years this Convent has secured a livelihood for more than a thousand girls. Its merits are very great in all respects.'

This may be regarded as a sufficiently conclusive reply to all slanders on the Convent, but there is more to come. Directly Bishop Turinaz had first impugned the Convent, the Government had ordered an inspector to

Visit the Institution,

and report what he found. A surprise visit was paid, and the official report, dated October 24th 1899, states that the inspector was admitted without the least difficulty, that the girls employed were accommodated in a vast gallery, abundantly lighted, perfectly ventilated, and without even the slightest appearance of a workshop.

It would be impossible in a place of this kind to have an internal arrangement more favorable to the health of the pupils. We have acquired the conviction that it would be impossible to obtain elsewhere for our undisciplined and light-mannered girls a more favorable union of mental and moral conditions than they enjoy at this establishment.

Another inspector, sent with a view of testing the report of the first, corroborated all that had been said. This second inspector declared that the law was strictly observed in all religious houses, and that he was admitted instantly on knocking. Still a third inquiry was made; this time by the commissary of police at Nancy, and once again the report confirmed the earlier declarations of the previous inspectors.

As to the rather lengthy list of personal cruelties said to be inflicted on inmates, all these statements were

Tested by Interrogatories

from the police officials to the inmates of the institution, the nuns having been excluded from the inquiry. It was found that the allegations rested entirely on the statements of a single individual, a woman called Marie Folio, who had attempted to borrow money from the Sisters, and who subsequently uttered against them all the slanders so widely quoted, not one of which could be sustained by independent evidence when the police inquiry was made.

Catholics needed no reassurance with regard to the Good Shepherd community. They felt instinctively that the tales circulated were mere slanders, but in case any of our readers are interrogated by Protestant friends, or taunted by Protestant acquaintances with this Nancy story, the facts quoted will suffice to furnish rebutting answer.

In cases of attacks of Colic, Cramp, or Spasms, Evans's WITCH'S OIL will be found invaluable.—***

RIDE "ANGLO SPECIAL" CYCLES.