

A N O N Y M O U S

**Memoir of Jacques-Ernest Harmel,
1830-1885**

Reims, Imprimerie Jeanne-d'Arc, pour la réunion générale des vacances au
Val-des-Bois, 6 septembre 1913

1913

THIS EDITION

This is an English translation of the original French text, made for the website leonharmel.com in 2026. It follows the original sentence by sentence, without cuts or additions.

The text is given in full, translated from the 1913 edition. It has been typeset in the spirit of the original: title pages and headings follow the layout of the book; the illustrations have been cut out of the digitised document and restored.

The notes marked with an asterisk * have been added for this edition, to shed light on the historical context.

Léon Harmel, le Bon Père du Val-des-Bois

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General Holiday Reunion at Val-des-Bois

Saturday 6 September 1913

43rd Anniversary of the Death of Mr Léon HARMEL

85th Year of the Good Father Léon HARMEL

M E M O I R

O F

Jacques-Ernest HARMEL

1830-1885

Jacques-Ernest HARMEL was born at Rethel on 30 April 1830, and was baptized on the following 22 May.*

From his earliest years, he loved his brother Léon tenderly and delighted in sharing his games: he served his Mass and carried the cross in the processions that his elder brother organized. Tradition depicts him fulfilling these offices with rather little reverence; but the indulgence of his brother, who was nearly always grave and serious, did not hold it against the *“little devil”*.

More inclined to sporting exercise than to austere study, Ernest gave his teachers a great deal of trouble. One day his father, in the hope of humbling him and bringing him back to his duty, put him into the mill with the piecers. The scatterbrain did so well at it that, to the

* **NOTE** The printed heading reads “43rd Anniversary of the Death of Mr Léon HARMEL”: this should read “Mrs Léon Harmel”. Léon Harmel was still alive in 1913 (it is his “85th Year”); his wife, Gabrielle, had died at Val-des-Bois on 16 October 1870, forty-three years earlier.

great dismay of his parents, he had to be torn away by force from his new occupation. He had quickly become skilful, and his spinner was very pleased with him.

Yet beneath it all, his nature was extremely rich. Ernest was generous to a fault, as honest as the day is long, deeply affectionate and, above all that, an artist.

At Senlis, where he studied without, however, being able to finish his studies, prevented as he was by illness, he left good and lasting memories, less for his literary successes than for his excellent character and his moral qualities.

At eighteen, he was tried by an illness that lasted several years. The doctors prescribed rest, amusement and travel. At his mother's request, and surely at the secret wish of his own heart, his favourite brother, Léon, was given the task of accompanying him and following him everywhere, like a visible guardian angel attached to his person. This circumstance only drew tighter the bonds that united the two brothers. One might have said of them what Holy Scripture says of Jonathan and David, that the soul of the one clung to the soul of the other.

From 1852 to 1859, he worked at the Val-des-Bois mill with his father. In that same year, 1859, he was seized by so grave an illness that his condition was judged hopeless. His parents, full of faith and trust in the Most Holy Virgin, decided to take him to Liesse. On 31 July he was carried there on a bed, being unable to remain seated. He spent the night at Liesse, and the next day, in spite of his great weakness, he was carried to Mass, where he received Communion; he was suddenly cured. On the very day of his return to Reims, he went on foot to call on his doctor, who was dismayed and amazed at once.

On the following 1 September, accompanied by thirty-one members of his family, he came to offer Our Lady a silver heart set with a diamond, containing a parchment that recorded his cure and bore seventy signatures in attestation.

On 1 September 1860, he married Miss Louise-Alexandrine Guillot. The deep esteem and warm affection he had vowed to Abbé Caudel, a teacher at Senlis, led him to choose him to bless their union.

Four children were born of this marriage, of whom only one, André, survived him, and that by less than a year. The first two died, one at the age of three, the other at four; the last, Marie, went to join the two little angels on 30 October 1881, at the age of sixteen.

In these successive bereavements there was more than enough to shake a health already tried. Ernest sought his consolation first in God, then in the affection of his family, and particularly in that of Léon, and finally in work and in sacred music.

A fervent tertiary of St Francis, he brought to the exercises and practices of piety something of the fire of his character, and above all the most joyful impulse of his heart. In a note placed in the box for prayer intentions, which was to be read out in the chapel before the whole congregation, he humbly asked for prayers that he might “master his nature”. In the family, no one was mistaken about the author of the note; his style gave him away, and they laughed heartily.

Meanwhile, his friendship for his brother Léon kept growing, and kept its character of absolute selflessness. If we dwell on this affection, it is because it was very fruitful. How often Léon Harmel acknowledged that his brother supported him on every occasion and encouraged him to continue his work, so that, after God, he owed him almost all his successes. And truly it was no matter of indifference, for the cause of Our Lord and for the material and moral welfare of the workers, whether Léon Harmel succeeded or failed.

It is also to this brotherly love that the continuation of a most precious tradition is owed. After the death of the lamented head of the family, Jacques-Joseph Harmel, who so gloriously inaugurated the title of Good Father, Ernest set himself to prepare the passing of the

title and the obligations of *Good Father* to Léon. In this matter he displayed all the diplomacy of a lofty intelligence and a great heart.

He regarded the workers of the Val as members of his family: and so he brought all his best efforts to the work of regenerating the mill. His frankness, his cheerfulness and his proverbial generosity opened every heart to him. He made use of this ascendancy to bring closer to God those souls that had lived too long in indifference, not to say worse.

Ernest wished to succeed in everything. He marked his share in the running of the mill with a masterstroke that launched the firm on the path of progress. He was chiefly in charge of the commercial side. Thanks to his energy, which sometimes went as far as boldness, and thanks also to his skill, which had won him very useful connections, he changed the method of work by substituting spinning *on the firm's own account* for spinning *on commission*, which had weighed on the house like a kind of slavery and narrowed its horizons completely: it was fortune found, and also the ever-coveted glory of independence.

Another source of consolation for Ernest Harmel was sacred music. He gave himself to it with love and passion, and also with a success that honours him and honours his family, and that must help to make his memory still dearer. We give here the judgement of a connoisseur, Mr Robert, who was for many years choirmaster of Reims Cathedral:

“Reims, 24 October 1885.

“Mr Léon Harmel,

“I could not have received more striking news than that of the death of your brother, my excellent and sincere friend. More than once I was in a position to appreciate his talent and his eminent virtues; and so, I am certain of it, your lamented brother will live long in the memory of all who had the happiness of knowing him, for it is written: ‘The memory of the just shall never perish.’

To my great regret, Sir, it was quite impossible for me to join your respected family and your many friends in accompanying your lamented brother to his last resting place; my brother, the former parish priest of Vendresse, who is blind, was to arrive at my house that day, and I had to stay there to receive him. Nevertheless, rest assured, Sir, that I did not forget him in my prayers.

More than once I had the pleasure of accompanying your brother when he came to Reims and did me the honour of visiting me.

His visits were musical sessions rather than exchanges of courtesies. We would go through his new compositions and his old ones; he would sing them with all possible expression, so as to make me understand them, and then he would ask me what I thought of them; almost always my answer was a compliment. Now that your excellent brother is, alas, no longer here to set off his compositions for you, I ask your permission to give you my judgement on the worth of the works that your lamented brother has left us.

His *Stabat*, which contains beauties of the first order, is one of his most successful works. The musical expression always renders truly the feeling expressed by the words. The harmony, which is perhaps a little studied, is learned, expressive and always correct. The different parts that combine in the harmonic whole are all interesting and melodious, which shows that the author had a good understanding of voices. In a word, Sir, this work deserves a place in the libraries of all our good lovers of music, and above all in those of well-organized and well-directed choir schools.

The opera that your brother composed especially for men's voices, with obbligate piano accompaniment, contains charming melodies, very dramatic scenes and choruses with soli that must produce great effects: they are written, as a rule, a little low, because the author, wishing to have them performed by the members of the Catholic circles, sought to put them within their reach by not going beyond the range of ordinary voices. What shall I say, Sir, of the many vocal

compositions for one, two and three voices that your brother published at his own expense and offered so graciously to all his friends? Most of them are quite simply charming; they deserve to live as long as those of our good masters who excelled in this genre.

Here, Sir, is a very dry analysis of the works that your lamented brother has left us. I hope nevertheless that it may be, if not useful, at least agreeable to you.

Please accept, Sir, the homage of the most sympathetic sentiments of your devoted servant.”

(Signed) E. Robert,
Former Choirmaster of Reims Cathedral.

Mr Ernest Harmel, during the last twenty years of his life, lived in Nice, rue Palermo. He spent the summer months with his family and at Val-des-Bois.

He died on Monday 26 September 1885,^{*} at his home in Reims, after a very short illness, aged fifty-five and a half. His last conversations at Val-des-Bois concerned the veneration of Our Lady of the Factory (Notre-Dame de l’Usine), to which he was wholeheartedly devoted.



Musical Compositions of Ernest Harmel

No. 1 Canticle to Our Lady of the Factory, for two voices.

*** NOTE** 26 September 1885 was a Saturday. Ernest Harmel died on Monday 28 September 1885, the date given by the title of his will printed in 1886 and by Cousin-Henrat’s *Étude historique sur Warmeriville* (1900).

- » 2 Canticle to St Joseph, three equal voices.
- » 3 *Ave Verum*, solo and chorus for four voices.
- » 4 *Ave Verum*, solo and chorus for three voices.
- » 5 *Regina Cæli*, full chorus for four voices.
- » 6 *O Salutaris*, for soprano or tenor.
- » 7 *Noël*, hymn with harmonium accompaniment, *ad libitum*.
- » 8 *Chanson du Printemps*, with mirliton accompaniment.
- » 9 Cantata for a prize-giving, for three voices.
- » 10 Cantata for the Feast Day of a Mother Superior, three voices and solo.
- » 11 Cantata for the visit of a Bishop, three voices.
- » 12 *Au Jour d'une Profession*. Hymn for two voices, composed on the occasion of the Profession of Maria Harmel, on 18 October 1880.
- » 13 *Sérénade*, duet.
- » 14 *Marguerite*, canzonetta.
- » 15 *Paroles de Grand-Père*, song.
- » 16 *Le Paillon*, ballad.
- » 17 *Première Neige*, song.
- » 18 *Paysage*, song.
- » 19 *Premier Soleil*, song.
- » 20 *Le Ruisseau*, song.
- » 21 *Hommes et Flots*, waltz.
- » 22 *Bonjour*, aubade.
- » 23 *A quoi l'on rêve*, song.
- » 24 *Ange et Fleur*, song.
- » 25 *L'Amitié*, romance.
- » 26 *Premier Soleil*, song.

Stabat Mater, one volume.

Les Naufrageurs, lyric drama in three acts.

The desired pieces may be ordered from the Maison Fortin, successor to Emile Mennesson, 10, rue Carnot, Reims.