

At the Good Father's

Eugène Standaert

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 1898 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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AT THE GOOD FATHER'S

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EUGÈNE STANDAERT

AT THE GOOD FATHER'S



GAND

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1898

AT THE “GOOD FATHER’S”

Will you follow me?

We are setting off for Champagne.

Namur, Dinant, Givet: since here is the customs post, where everyone gets out, let us entrust our bits of luggage to the railway, and off we go along the main road of the Meuse valley.

Oh, the delightful way to travel, the only one: to set out cheerfully at the first rising of the sun, in the freshness of the dew and the lilac of the morning mists; to lunch on the way on a golden omelette or a savoury trout; to linger, in the hot hours of the day, in some prolonged siesta before a well-chosen landscape; to reach the last milestone of the stage at the hour when, for the luminous parade of the sunset, the sun goes off spreading its tail like a peacock; and at last to find again that good evening dinner, that sober but substantial dinner of the Ardennes: what a life, what joy! What joy indeed, appearing to the man who, for a whole year, finds himself shut up in the narrow atmosphere of the study or of the law courts, as the condition of an indispensable relaxation of the brain, of a necessary supply of brisk and invigorating air.

A pity that I must take you so far; with what good humour we would follow the Meuse in its capricious meanders from Givet to Fumay, where the landscape shows a singular grandeur, then to Revin, with, a little further on, the group of the “Ladies of the Meuse”, enormous dark rocks, laced in, as if in a corset, by the narrow valley, but which, far from recalling the graces and the charm that their name awakens, seem rather a gigantic petrification of ugly and massive witches.

We would go on by Laifour, where I would recommend to you, for lunch, the excellent fried fish stews of Mother Rousseau, towards

Monthermé and its picturesque view over the Semoys, and so on as far as Charleville, through scenery now stern, now smiling, where the little mists of the country blur the horizons with their pink, blue and violet gauze, idealizing the landscape, like those light veils that often make our women so beautiful.

At Charleville, I would say to you: go no further on foot, for here is Champagne; farewell, valleys and rocks; it is the immense plain, uniform, dreary, without even any of the colouring and the abundant fertility of our Flanders.

From Charleville, cover the stages by express train and get out only at Reims, the capital of Champagne and of champagne.

My impressions of Reims, alas, I can only take ten lines to tell you. Enormous champagne cellars, immense catacombs holding millions and millions of bottles, an interesting visit that I recommend to everyone. Excellent hotels; at dinner, strange dishes never eaten anywhere else, washed down with wines by the carafe, pink, red and white wines, with a peculiar and savoury little taste; only one must beware of them. Lastly, and this is unique, there is the Cathedral: a lace of stones, a profusion of delicate and refined sculptures, of a truth and an artistry of execution such that, when one arrives under the great portal, before the double row of bishops and apostles lined up there, one instinctively takes off one's hat to greet them, so animated and alive do they seem, these great stone saints who guard the entrance of the basilica. If only I could linger to tell you the intense emotion one feels at the sight of this colossal jewel! But even that is forbidden me; I must pass on.

For over there, seventeen kilometres from Reims, hidden in the depths of the fir woods, is the avowed goal of our journey: Val-des-Bois, a mill like the swarms of them all around us, yet such as exists nowhere else, the spinning mill of Harmel frères.

What did I know of it? Little enough. Oh, I had read and reread that magnificent book, *Manuel d'une Corporation Chrétienne*, which

contains in its five hundred pages the theoretical exposition of the work of Val-des-Bois.

But... it is old, this book; it dates from 1879; then there is the wide gulf eternally dug between theory and practice; then again, paper is so pliable and never refuses anything; lastly — I beg pardon of whom it may concern — the author had, in my eyes, the fault of being the author of his own works, and I suspected in him that double vision, like the one parents have for their children, that double vision which the Flemish proverb characterizes so well in these four words: *mijn kind schoon kind*.

So it was with a strong grain of scepticism that we went there; not that we lacked faith: St Thomas also had faith, which did not stop him from wanting to touch with his finger.

Here we are at the little station of Warmeriville. While the train drives its white plume into the long line of telegraph wires, we search the horizon with our eyes, with the concentrated uneasiness of people who, without having announced themselves, are going into the unknown among strangers and ask themselves this enigmatic question: what awaits us there?

It is not far to walk; the spinning mill is there, two hundred metres away. And it is with small steps, lingering by the bushes along the road, each of us trying not to be the first, that we reach the entrance gate of the mill.

“Is Mr Harmel in?” The porter appears, cap in hand, a little bald old man, still very spry on his shaky pins. “You mean Mr Léon Harmel, the Good Father? We’ll see, we’ll see; come in anyway.” And here we are, already somewhat encouraged, following in single file the gentle Cerberus who leads us.

Twenty metres from the mill buildings stands a fairly large dwelling, very simple, with only one upper floor, its walls whitewashed with lime: this is where Mr Léon Harmel lives. The inside is just as simple. The maid, in a blue apron, shows us into a large room; it is a

dining room with grey hangings, with, on the walls, three views of the Vatican in oak frames, in a corner two mediocre pictures, a large refectory table in the middle and, lined up all around, modest cane chairs. Add to these a set of shelves and a mahogany desk, a bronze on the mantelpiece, perhaps the only object of any value, and you will have what in legal style is called a faithful and exact inventory.

You stop me, do you not? You ask me what this strange procedure is, of inventorying in detail the furniture of a dining room, what these manners mean of entering people's houses like a bailiff's man. Allow me! One must never neglect the first impression, while reserving the right to correct by analysis or judgement the error or the false idea it may give rise to. Now, the first impression one feels at Val-des-Bois is, there is no denying it, a disappointment.

On entering the home of these great industrialists one finds everything so ordinary, so simple, the porter so humble, the maid so homely, the house and the furniture so modest, that a kind of bewilderment comes over you. And this impression, which grows stronger as one visits the chaplaincy, the youth club rooms, the offices, the schools, the chapel, this impression would leave the superficial visitor with a real disappointment if, with the help of reflection, one did not come to this conclusion: It is intended. Yes, it is intended; luxury is banished from Val-des-Bois systematically, pitilessly.

Luxury: but just listen to what Grandfather Harmel, the founder of the mill, says of it in the admirable testament he left to his family, which forms, as it were, the fundamental charter of the whole institution of Val-des-Bois.

"Treasure the heritage of simplicity that I have left you. Luxury ruins families, often divides them, and offends God. Do not, therefore, take as your example people of the world, for whom success is the beginning of a life of ostentation, in which their vanity seeks an empty satisfaction. Let the style of your household and of your habits be simple, and always well below your station. Let a certain austerity,

which better becomes Christians, reign in your life and in your furnishings. I cannot insist too strongly on this point. By acting thus, you will accustom your children to that simple life which is the safeguard of good morals and of prosperity. Children imitate everything they see and, if the parents live simply, they imitate them.

“In our time, luxury is a slope that carries us down, even without our knowing it. It is a current of ideas, an atmosphere one breathes, with which one becomes imbued little by little. Everything in the world preaches luxury to us and draws us towards it; it has almost been made into a virtue.

“And so, my dear children, I want you to stand firm against this baneful current, and you will have the measure of your simplicity if the world finds that you are too simple.”*

Admirable, is it not? And just as admirable is the generation of children and grandchildren who have engraved these teachings in their hearts and apply them in their actions with a fidelity that goes as far as scruple.

It is too modest, it is too simple! Yes, that was the first remark that fell from our lips on arriving at Val-des-Bois, as from those of so many others, no doubt; the first impression of the passing visitor, who sees things only on the surface, who sees them with poor worldly eyes. But when one knows, when, going to the bottom of things, one suddenly understands that the organization of Val-des-Bois was born and grows thanks to continual deductions from the luxury of the employers, that the financial secret of this magnificent work lies there entirely, in the voluntary and daily renunciation by the Harmels of the share, so legitimate though it is, of comfort and

* **NOTE** “Grandfather Harmel” is Jacques-Joseph Harmel (1795-1884), father of Léon Harmel and founder of the Val-des-Bois mill, the first “good father”. His testament is published in this collection (*Testament du bon père Jacques-Joseph Harmel*, 1884). Eugène Standaert quotes a passage from it here (p. 10 and 12); the sentence he reports on p. 12 reads there as follows: “Love our dear workers; they were my children; you will take up my paternity; you will continue to lead them towards God and to do them good.”

luxury, oh! then it is admiration that comes over you, it is enthusiasm.

And this first impression, thus corrected, is it not far better than the one we feel on seeing a luxurious château raising, in the shadow of the mill where the common people toil, the pride of its turrets and the arrogance of its sham machicolations?

Legitimate pride, so be it! Permissible arrogance, certainly! But tell me: when the worker, at whom the hounds of hell ceaselessly spit the burning fires of unhealthy covetousness, when the worker, often badly paid, rubs shoulders, every day that God gives him, with this dazzling luxury, the direct fruit of his hard labour, must he not feel, at the bottom of even the most steadfast soul, if he is a socialist, a rumble of revolt, if he is a Christian, a hurt?

And, without condemning or blaming anyone, will not all our preferences go to the employer who, to avoid even the hurt, has built himself a dwelling almost like those of his workers, and who takes care every day, by the modesty and simplicity of his life, to build a bridge between the workers and himself?

You are no longer laughing, are you, at my inventory of a moment ago? Suggestive and eloquent, the whitewashed walls, the refectory table, the modest cane chairs, the maid's blue apron.

But here is the Good Father. The Good Father, that is to say the head of Val-des-Bois, the one in whose hands rest the prerogatives and the duties of authority, the kind but firm keeper of the family traditions. Freely chosen, without regard to the rights of seniority, by all the surviving members of each generation, the one elected immediately becomes, for life, the head of the family, the employer of the mill, invested with an almost absolute power, and, from the very first hour, in a respectful acknowledgement of authority, all of them, his children, his grandchildren, his brothers, even his elders, call him: The Good Father.

A fine name to bear, but a formidable one; for every day and every hour it reminds the one who bears it of the responsibility and the duties of his paternity, of that broad paternity which extends not only to the workers of the mill but to their entire families, that paternity which Grandfather Harmel summed up in these words: "Love our dear workers; they were my children; it will be for the one who succeeds me to continue to lead them towards God and to do them good."*

To tell you that the present Good Father is Mr Léon Harmel is to tell you at the same time with what serene dignity this name is borne; and when the old workers of Val-des-Bois, and even the little ones who dabble in the earth while still tiny, call out as he passes: Good day, Good Father! it is a cry from the heart that comes from these old or young breasts, an affectionate greeting, a tribute paid to the qualities, the virtues, the exquisite kindness of the employer.

Here he is, then, the Good Father, second of the name, coming forward to meet us, welcoming, his hands outstretched.

Solidly built, short rather than tall, stout rather than thin, a kindly face, a little pale, of a pallor heightened by the very black framing of his mutton-chop whiskers, the forehead high, above all because of the faintness of the eyebrows, Mr Léon Harmel, who may well be fifty-five years old, presents the type of a fine admiral's head, with a manner a little cold at first, a little stern, but very quickly softened by a kindly smile and by rounded, welcoming gestures. The face, moreover, is extremely mobile, and let the moment come when the Good Father speaks to you of the two passions of his life, Jesus Christ and the worker: his grey-brown eyes, his large deep eyes, suddenly light up, sparks pass through them, and his broad face is illuminated entirely with a real beauty, the beauty of an apostle.

* **NOTE** See the note on page 10.

The introductions made, our letters of introduction handed over, the Good Father utters the Ah, well! that is familiar to him and, with the graciousness of a patriarch of old: "Gentlemen," he says, "you are my guests"; and, taking me by the arm as if we were a pair of old friends: "Come, we shall take a first look."

The Val-des-Bois mill, which was founded in 1840, comprises wool combing, dyeing, carded-wool and combed-wool spinning, twisting and fancy goods (this for those to whom the language of industry is not Volapük); I will add that the mill is driven by the river Suippe and by three engines developing a motive power of eight hundred horsepower. It is in the middle of a large estate, apart from Warmerville, the neighbouring village, that the mill is set, that busy and noisy hive which employs more than 800 workers every day.

At the first glance one notices the characteristic feature of Val-des-Bois: an industrial community.

In the centre, the Mill, spacious, enormous; immediately after it, the dwellings of the Harmel family: the unity of the family, that powerful source of prosperity, is no empty phrase there; besides, an industry like that one can absorb a good many heads; and so, each time a Harmel marries, a new dwelling rises from the ground, the new household is settled in it, and Val-des-Bois counts one more home. Here is the chapel, a little less simple, this one, with its pointed arches and its slender little bell turret. Emerging from the clumps of greenery, there are the workers' houses; very neat and trim, they give an impression of real well-being, all having in front a carefully tended little garden where the flowers fling out, by the armful, the sweetness of their scents and the brilliant gaiety of their colours; behind these dwellings, a kitchen garden, large enough to grow the principal vegetables. And on the door of each house — a radiant symbol of Christian communion and of touching fraternity — is a cross, everywhere the same, on the Good Father's door as on the worker's, a cross bearing in its centre the Sacred Heart and, around

it, these words: "Jesus Christ the King — Homage and consecration." Here again is the Chaplaincy, where the Father Chaplain and his assistant live, the convent of the nuns and the girls' classes; further on, the residence of the Brothers and their school for boys; here and there, again, neat little detached houses, those of the foremen. All this marked with the same common seal, the cross; all this irregularly scattered in the open air and the greenery, amid the fancy of the groves and the clumps of shrubs; all this very simple and very modest, if you like, but borrowing from the serene graces of the countryside and from its surroundings I know not what restful charm of well-being and happiness.

It is in a glow of joy that the Good Father walks us through this Christian city of which he is the head, the beloved king: "Yes, all this," he says, "is beautiful; beautiful the work, consoling the results; but one must go back some forty years to understand the road travelled.

"The poor Val-des-Bois of those days, drowned in that flood of materialism which floods Champagne; everything here was irreligion, immorality, indifference; the employer's authority a myth, the integrity of the conjugal home, respect for the family, mere fancies!

"For a long, long time Jacques Harmel worked for the good of the worker, founding music and gymnastic societies, mutual aid associations, using all his authority, all his influence to draw his workers towards the good, alas! without any appreciable result, without even the consolation of believing that he had some influence over his workers. God gave him the grace to understand that he was on the wrong road.

"And it was then that there took root in him this idea, which was a programme and which has become the motto of Val-des-Bois: Christ and Liberty.

"Christ, that is to say Religion, the basis of all progress and of all social renewal; nothing without Jesus Christ, the great peacemaker

of souls. Yes, that is the solution, the great one, the only one. Let your social works always be primarily, fundamentally religious; let that be the real, immediate, declared goal towards which you strive; otherwise the soul of the people will always escape you, and you will do nothing, nothing, nothing that is solid and therefore lasting.

“You may well give the worker, as was given to the Roman plebs, *panem et circenses*: he will answer your call in crowds, he will amuse himself for a while with your bread and your games, you will gather him around you as long as the bread is fresh and the games new; but make no mistake, you do not have his soul, and from then on he is ripe for every enticement and for every defection.

“To undertake a social work without openly, bluntly displaying religion as its primary goal is, I assure you, to build on grains of sand.

“And liberty! Oh, that keystone of social action upon the people. How mistaken are all those who imagine they can win the worker by the pressure of the employer’s influence, by way of authority or oppression; a fatal error, which consists in believing that the soul of the people can be tamed.”

And, as he speaks, the Good Father’s voice grows animated. It has accents of deep and penetrating conviction; with the tip of his cane he feverishly traces little random strokes in the sand; his gait becomes agitated, it takes on I know not what peculiar motion in which there is rolling and pitching, a saucepan motion, as sailors say in heavy weather; and at times an energetic gesture comes to hammer home the essential idea in the sentence.

And he goes on: “The social question, believe me, is as much a question of dignity as a question of the stomach. People are not sufficiently convinced that the worker is a man, I mean an intelligent being like you and me, made of the same flesh and the same blood, having like us a heart capable of love, of devotedness, of affection. These qualities are perhaps dormant in many. And what is surprising in that? We are the children of a century which seems to have taken

as its task to wither, to humiliate and to revolt the heart of the worker. It is this heart that must be awakened, that must be won; but for that, believe me, a great deal is needed, and infinite delicacy. By way of authority, by oppression, by fear, nothing is to be gained. As the flower withers under the drying wind, so human liberty, under constraint, refuses to yield up the will. You will have appearances of submission, phantoms of adherence; the worker will come to you through threats or fear; but if his heart remains mutinous or unsubdued, what will you have gained?

“And that is why the founder of Val-des-Bois, like myself, we exert no pressure on our workers, confining ourselves to being their educators, to awakening their dormant initiative, to giving them the consciousness of their dignity and their responsibility, always striving to break down all the obstacles that may stand in the way of their liberty, whether these obstacles come from the authority of the employer, from the action of the foremen or from the tyranny of their surroundings. And, as you go further into the organization of Val-des-Bois, you will see that everything there is organized to give the worker a keen sense of his liberty and of his dignity. All our works are established and directed by the workers themselves; certainly we have our place in them; certainly our advice and our warnings are never lacking to them; but they are the masters of the works, they know it, and that is what is needed.

“We have sometimes seen the workers go the wrong way in economic matters, for example; we could have prevented it; we preferred to leave them free.

“Nor do we ever stifle contradiction, wherever it comes from; it has sometimes gone as far as hostility. What have we gained by it? That discontent does not rumble slyly in the ranks, seeping in unseen, like the worm gnawing in the fruit, but that, from the very beginning, freely and without fear, it breaks out into the open. And thus conflicts, stopped at their source, are easily calmed and always

turn to the advantage of our works, by making each one's liberty more evident and the voluntary adherence deeper."

But — I asked — if the employers of Val-des-Bois never use the weight of their influence, if they exert no pressure on the worker, I no longer see the motive power that drives and feeds your works?

"The motive power," he answered, "why, it is *the apostolate of the worker upon the worker*."

"What the work *that one founds* needs is not many members, not the mass, but the flower. It is a nucleus that is needed, a nucleus formed in the school of workers' retreats, a good, pious nucleus, of a piety proof against everything; and then let things take their course. You will see your work, by a veritable phenomenon of agglutination, grow and increase; you will see the worker, left to his own initiative, turn into an apostle and bring about in his surroundings conversions of which no employer is capable."

And, summing himself up in a great circular gesture: "Everything lies there, believe me: Christ and Liberty. Religion, the supreme goal and the fundamental basis of all social and economic works. Liberty, with its indispensable corollary, the apostolate of the worker upon the worker."

And it was arm in arm with us, in that tone of affectionate unreserve which is the Good Father's own, that we strolled, talking of these things, along the paths of Val-des-Bois. From time to time, to the right, to the left, around the workers' houses, little groups of mischievous and laughing urchins burst out like a flight of sparrows, crying in their thin young voices: Good evening, Good Father! Good evening, Good Father! He would then stop, call them, and, drawing from the depths of his frock coat some inexhaustible treasure of sugar sweets, hand them round with little tender caresses, filling with sweets those dear tiny hands, which were no doubt pink in the morning but were very black at that hour. And, once their hands were full,

the little bands flew off as fast as they could through the bushes, with laughing chirps by way of thanks!

Now it is time for dinner; it is seven o'clock in the evening. Meanwhile we are seated on the little lawn in front of the house; it is the hour when the family, scattered all day by its occupations, comes to greet its head. They arrive one by one, the sons and grandsons of the Harmels, the latter strong young men who promise the family solid and sturdy generations. All, great and small, come respectfully to kiss the Good Father, greet us and sit down, without any introduction, without surprise at seeing strangers there or curiosity to know who they are. And while the Good Father gently, with infinite kindness, asks each of his family how he has spent his day, one of his granddaughters, a child of about twelve no doubt, comes out of a garden path, seated on a frisky little donkey, an all-grey one, with superb ears. With delightful grace, on the sly, she leads the donkey behind the bench where her grandpapa is sitting. There, stopping short, she leans over her mount and, crying out with a pearly laugh: Good evening, Good Father! she fondly kisses him on the forehead. And this family group, the Good Father surrounded by these handsome, sturdy lads who are his grandsons, with, in the background, the dainty grace of this pretty little girl so charmingly seated on her grey pony, the whole standing out against a background of fir trees reddened by the carmine blaze of evening: it was a living picture, I will say better, an apotheosis of that admirable family spirit which reigns at Val-des-Bois.

Ah, that family spirit, how we were given to admire it; at table above all, where the Good Father presides, with the chaplain of Val-des-Bois on his right. How they are all there, respectful of his paternity, attentive to all he says, never interrupting his conversation, eager, it seems, to draw from the source the teachings of the great and strong authority that reigns over them. Does he express a wish (an order is never needed), a Harmel is already on his feet, the wish

is carried out. And all this is done so simply that it truly seems that to be able to satisfy a wish of the Good Father is a reward for them.

Always, on anniversaries and patronal feasts, there is, after Holy Communion as a family in the morning, the family meal in the evening. One of these meals had just taken place on the occasion of the happy return from the pilgrimage to Rome, to which the Good Father had led more than three thousand pilgrims, half of them French workers.

A demonstration had been decided upon; with the band at its head, they had gone to the station; the whole mill was there, the whole family of Val-des-Bois, congratulating, celebrating, acclaiming the return of the pilgrims; and the children were there too, with bunches of flowers, their little hands full, in honour of Leo XIII's guests. It is a constant concern there to associate the children with these demonstrations, to shape their budding minds and their young enthusiasms in the mould of Christian ideas. And, on the evening of that return from Rome, at the family meal, where, as a sign of great and exceptional joy, the sparkling wine of the region flowed, a very young Harmel, Jacques, a boy of nine, had risen at dessert, and here is his toast:

“I raise my glass to the Good Father.

“It is with enthusiasm and with pride that we greet your return. We would like to make the victorious fanfares that sound in our souls ring in your ears. Once again Christ has shown you that your effort carries success with it, and this new encouragement given to your faith crowns your labours with a halo and blesses them.

“This Pilgrimage has been a victorious march. The soul of the people has awakened and has found again its impulse of filial piety under the blessing Hand of Leo XIII. Christian democracy has thrilled and has felt as it were a new sap flowing through its veins. May Jesus Christ be glorified!

Christ and Liberty.”

On the subject of the workers' pilgrimages to Rome, when I questioned Mr Harmel on the usefulness of these expeditions, on the advisability of thus developing in the worker the idea of spending and travelling, asking him whether the cost and the forced loss of work to which the pilgrims are exposed are, in the end, made up for by real spiritual or social advantages: "Oh," he answered me, "trust my experience: the pilgrimages to Rome do the worker immense good; first of all, they open up horizons for him, they develop his intelligence astonishingly; then they are done at little cost: the worker, chosen three, four, five years in advance, longs for this magnificent journey, which he regards as the high point of his life; slowly, sou by sou, he puts by the small savings needed; and when he comes back, when he has seen the Pope, when he has laid his humble offering at his feet, when he has felt on his cheek the caressing hand of Leo XIII, that man is transformed; he carries away from the Vatican a memory that he will keep until the grave; he has become a zealot of the Pope. And let the day come when, in circumstances that God alone can know, the Holy Father must appeal to the whole Catholic world to defend his safety: these pilgrims will be soldiers and, if need be, heroes!"

Those who have followed me so far will perhaps find that I am lingering, and will ask me where I am going, losing myself like this in tiny details amid which the organization of Val-des-Bois appears to count for little.

Details? But does not the Good Father tell us that, to win the worker, to have his heart, there is need, before everything, of a great deal of delicacy, and is not delicacy rather the science of details? Where am I? Why, in the very soul of my subject; do you not feel that I have touched the most intimate fibres that give life to this vast organization?

This general physiognomy of a community marked with the sign of the cross; this study, taken from life, of the employer as educating father and nourishing father of his workers; these great ideas on the

dignity of the poor; this programme, Christ and Liberty; the apostolate of the worker upon the worker; the superb example of a great Christian family living in voluntary simplicity, in communion with the workers, showing them that the true happiness of this world is to be found amid the joys of the family and the intimacy of the home; and even... those sugar sweets: what is all this, if not the very revelation of the inner secret of this work?

The principles, the basis and the mainspring of everything, there they are; the canvas, you have it; it only remains for me to embroider upon it the astonishing garland of the religious and social works of Val-des-Bois.



The community, the Christian corporation of Val-des-Bois, comprises about eight hundred men and women workers, who, with their families, form a corporative population of more than 1,400 souls.

A vast network of works enfolds each of the members of this corporation, from childhood to old age, from the cradle to the grave, enclosing him more closely as he grows in its protective meshes, whose marvellous linking forms the cohesion of all in one and the same Christian feeling, in one and the same corporative spirit.

See first what Mr Harmel calls the fundamental works, works at once familial and apostolic, called fundamental because they were the beginning and they still form the basis of the whole institution.

In the front rank, the work of works, the Catholic schools, categorically opposed to the secular schools that cover Champagne, those poor secular schools which corrupt, in its childhood and in its youth, that fine youth of France, thus justifying, ceaselessly, these admirable lines of Alfred de Musset:

The virgin heart of man is a deep vessel;
When the first water poured into it is impure,
The sea might pass through it and not wash out the stain,

For the abyss is immense and the stain lies at the bottom.

At Val-des-Bois they are pure and wholesome, the springs from which young minds drink.

Here, for the very little ones, is the infant school, which does not close even during the holidays. We went there; at our entrance, all these little boys and girls of four, five, six years old stand up like so many automatons and, while the good sister clicks her commanding castanets in time, the little troop sings in our honour, first a very gentle *Ave Maria*, then, with a devilish swing, one of those "*Mourir pour la Patrie*" with which they excel, in France, in sharpening national feeling.

When the children are of school age, they leave the infant section; the boys go to the Brothers; there are three classrooms there, spacious, bright, well ventilated, with all the equipment needed for the most perfected teaching; likewise the girls' school at the Sisters'.

But that is not all; from the most tender age they want to instil into the children the habits of association, to make them understand its pleasure and its usefulness; hence the Association of St Aloysius Gonzaga for the boys, and that of St Philomena for the girls, to which only children aged from seven up to their First Communion may belong. These associations meet every Sunday and feast day in a special hall; they have special games and, alternating with pious exercises, these days are spent in the liveliest and noisiest amusements. The Association of St Aloysius is directed by a council made up exclusively of children of nine to ten; every Thursday at eleven o'clock they meet and, under the chairmanship of a Brother, deliberate like little men on the wishes of their comrades, on the spirit to be put into recreations and outings, and also, it must not be forgotten, on the apostolate to be exercised among their fellows.

This association now has eighty members; all undertake to attend the seven o'clock Mass in the morning, and the most zealous pay a short visit to the Blessed Sacrament every day when school is over.

The Association of St Philomena, under the direction of the Sisters, is organized on the same plan; there too the councillors, girls of nine to ten, among whom are little Harmel girls, meet every Sunday, and each, while expressing the wishes of the members for the organization and the novelty of the games, gives an account of the little efforts she has made to be pleasant and useful to her companions. For this idea is constantly put into these young heads: that selfishness is a very ugly thing, and that there is no better means in the world of being happy than to devote oneself to others, to be pleasant to them and to do them services. Every Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, the little members of St Philomena are gathered at the housekeeping school, where, from the most tender age and in the most attractive forms, they are initiated into household matters.

Then comes the First Communion. This *dies magna* of Christian life is celebrated at the mill as a family feast; the employers take part in it, not only with their generosity but in person; they attend all the ceremonies, each child is presented to them individually, and they see closely to it that nothing is lacking to anyone and that there is not a shadow on the universal joy of that beautiful day.

The First Communion made, the children leave the associations of St Aloysius Gonzaga and of St Philomena to enter, the boys the Little Circle, the girls the Association of the Holy Angels.

Admitted to the Little Circle are the boys from their First Communion up to the age of seventeen.

Every Sunday they meet in their hall; in summer, most often, they set off for the woods to breathe the tarry scents of the fir plantations and to enjoy themselves in the good and healthy fatigue of walking; in winter they try their hand at gymnastic exercises, learn music, amuse themselves with various games. The members of the Little Circle receive Communion every first Friday of the month.

On 4 May, the feast of their patron, Blessed Jean de la Salle, the Little Circle rejoices! In the morning, general Communion, followed

by a long walk in the woods, during which a lunch, served on the grass, offers these young stomachs all the delights of a little gastronomic feast.

Already in the Little Circle we find young people who work at the mill (they are admitted at fourteen); but in that case they must go to school for an hour every day and follow, once a week, the catechism and singing lessons.

Two special retreats, one of them at Easter, are preached every year exclusively for the members of the Little Circle. The council is made up of young workers presided over by the Father Chaplain; it meets every Monday evening at half past six. The councillors, elected by their comrades, almost always from among the most pious and the most zealous, have the direction of the outings, the games and the various exercises, and they strive to exercise among their fellows an apostolate suited to their age.

Likewise for the girls up to the age of fifteen, the Association of the Holy Angels, with, at its head, a council of women workers under the chairmanship of the Chaplain; the council's duties, say the statutes, are "to admit the new members, to put spirit into the boisterous games that suit that age, to maintain the good spirit and to promote the practices of piety".

The members of the Holy Angels who work at the mill must go every day for an hour to the housekeeping school, except on Tuesday, which is reserved for catechism.

The members undertake always to say a prayer before setting to work in the mill, to consecrate an hour of their work mentally to the Sacred Heart and, as far as possible, to pay a short visit to the Blessed Sacrament on leaving the workshop.

Here again we find the monthly Communion, two special retreats every year and, among the most pious, the Communions of reparation.

Here too, a great feast day puts joy into the hearts of all these young people: on the first Sunday of October, the feast of the Holy Angels, after the general Communion and breakfast, a long walk in the country; on the return, reception of the new members, a banquet served at the Sisters' to the members of the association and, lastly, in the evening, a special performance at the Val-des-Bois theatre.

Let us note, in passing, the very original organization of the quarterly sales: to spur the young people to attend these numerous meetings regularly, there are held every three months auction sales of pleasant or useful articles supplied by the employers; the currency in use for paying for the purchases is the attendance voucher which the members receive when they attend the meetings of their various associations.

And here again I insist, for a moment, on the entire freedom of each person, at Val-des-Bois, to belong or not to belong to the works: I will cite one example, because it is striking above all others; I was going to say it goes too far: among the children of the mill's workers there are 19 boys and 7 girls who, systematically deprived of the priceless benefits of a Catholic education, attend the secular school of the neighbourhood, without the parents ever having been troubled on that account by their employers!

When now the hour comes when, in working-class surroundings above all, the world, with its neighing lust for pleasure, covets as its prey the grace and the seventeen years of a young girl, then the solicitude of an ever-wakeful lookout follows the young woman worker with its fatherly cares; from the age of sixteen she leaves the Association of the Holy Angels to become a Child of Mary.

The Association of the Children of Mary has about one hundred and fifty members, who, all Sunday long, meet under the direction of the Sisters in a special hall; they divide the day between pious exercises, walks and games; periodically excursions, pilgrimages, concerts and dramatic performances are organized, in which they are in turn

actresses and spectators; in a word, everything is set to work to attract them, to interest them, to amuse them. In the evening, at nine o'clock, the mothers come to fetch their daughters at the association's hall.

In this way they succeed in keeping all these fine young people away from the dance halls and popular concerts which, unfortunately, swarm in the neighbourhood.

Among the Children of Mary, as elsewhere, we find again the monthly Communions, the retreats, the patronal feast on 8 December, with a banquet at noon and a theatrical performance in the evening; in turn, two women workers are on duty for the week, that is to say they are allowed to leave their work at the mill to attend Mass and to make, in the name of their companions, the Communion of reparation.

Nothing is neglected either to encourage the young people to marry; none of those prudish ways that do not allow one to speak to young people of the happiness of living as a couple and of the joy of loving.

The Good Father would willingly make his own this saying of Mr Verspeyen: "I am for young marriages and large families."

On the day when a Child of Mary is united before God to a good and honest worker, we witness at Val-des-Bois one of the most touching displays of piety and Christian joy that can be seen.

The religious ceremony is surrounded with unusual solemnity: two prie-dieux and two armchairs covered with garnet velvet await the betrothed couple at the foot of the altar; all the members of the Harmel family who are not kept away by pressing occupations are there in the front row, and, during the Mass said for the happiness of the young couple, if the organ stops for a moment sounding its festive strains, it is because the Father Chaplain has turned round and, in a short address, is telling the happy pair of the day the greatness of Christian marriage, the happiness of living in love, under the eye of

God and blessed by Him. From the chapel, the young couple are taken to the hall of the Association of the Children of Mary, where, on leaving the mill, all the members have gathered.

On a platform are placed four seats, where the heroes of the feast, the chaplain and the Good Father sit; the latter gives one of those affectionate little speeches of which this angel of a man has the secret, and then, embracing the newly-weds in fatherly fashion, he presents them with his wedding gift, always the same: a crucifix that will adorn the place of honour in the new home, and a dowry of a hundred francs. Lastly, the chaplain removes the young wife's Child of Mary medal, and she, going from group to group, kisses one by one the companions of her girlhood, who congratulate and acclaim her and bid her farewell; and this scene is so deeply touching that the Good Father and the chaplain themselves, despite habit and the years, speak to us of it with stirred hearts and moved voices. If the girl has no parents left, it is the Good Father who receives the guests, and the wedding meal takes place at his table. Moreover, Mr Léon Harmel invites all his workers to dinner in turn, and always, at these meals, the place of honour falls to the father of the family who has the most children.

Is it not a dream? And this is to be seen in that land of France where, every day and every hour, contemporary literature, press and theatre degrade and revile marriage, showing us all husbands as laughable, wives as adulterous, mothers as mere brood hens; where implacable statistics lay bare a state of marriage unworthy of the name, which is no longer, in the end, anything but a bond of concubinage, lightened by the suppression of children and broken by divorce. And tell me, are they not a little Christian epic, these scenes so simply sublime that I have just related to you, a heroic raising up of that Christian marriage so ridiculed over there, a chivalrous challenge flung in the face of the matrimonial bankruptcy of France? An epic, I

tell you, and one which, in biblical times, would have kept God from creating the Dead Sea!

Moreover, divine blessings are not lacking at Val-des-Bois. It is the rule that the Good Father is godfather to the tenth child, and the workers do their best to see that this godfathership is no sinecure; what is more, while for France the recruiting boards show us more than twenty per cent of young men physically unfit for military service, at Val-des-Bois this figure is reduced to six per cent!

We have just seen that the married woman leaves the Children of Mary on the very day of her wedding; but do not imagine that she is then left to her own strength; no, a new association opens for her: the Association of St Anne, in which the married women are united, say the statutes, "for their own sanctification and that of their families".

Here the primary aim is no longer so much preservation as the formation and education of the Christian mother. Not many meetings, only one a month, but how important they are, and what an idea is formed there of the mother of a family! Not a single innovation, economic or other, is attempted at Val-des-Bois without having first passed through the Association of St Anne; no new institution is introduced without its elements having been proposed, discussed and adopted by the mothers of families.

It is, moreover, a fact of observation that, in working-class surroundings, the woman, accustomed to running the household and less absorbed than the man by the hard fatigues of daily labour, grasps speculative matters better, more easily learns the mechanism of economic innovations, and foresees, with a keen sense, their advantages and drawbacks.

Would you like, moreover, by one tiny detail, to grasp the whole practical usefulness of these associations of married women?

One day, incidentally, at the monthly meeting, one of the members of St Anne alluded to the nuisance of having no barber at Val-des-Bois, her man having to go on Saturday evenings to Warmeriville,

where he sometimes had to wait a long time. The Good Father, who was attending the meeting, thought of holding there and then a little general inquiry into the barber question; result: most of the husbands asked their wives every Saturday for six sous: three sous for the barber, three more for a drink while waiting their turn; but that devil of a practitioner had so much to do that more than one came home in the evening without being shaved and... without the six sous.

If only they had known Martial's complaint, lamenting the slowness of Eutrapelus the barber, they could have repeated to their simple wives the famous quatrain:

God deliver me from Eutrapelus
And from his slowness in shaving;
While he amuses himself chattering
My beard grows back thicker than ever.

However that may be, the inquiry was conclusive, the abuse established; something had to be done.

"But," said the Good Father, "if I hired a barber to shave everyone in the mill itself, he would go round from frame to frame, without any interruption of work, without anyone having to move or be disturbed, and, who knows? we might perhaps have him at a sou a head."

The proposal was carried by acclamation of the mothers of families.

And that is how, every Saturday, Master Figaro, at the rate of one sou a head, silently carries his foaming soap and his gleaming razor through the clattering swarm of the mill.

And, see how inventions are sometimes made without anyone knowing it: the Good Father has thus created, without ever having thought of it, a thing as rare as a Musigny 1858: a barber who shaves but does not talk!

Does this one example not show the full practical usefulness of an association of mothers of families understood and directed in this way?

From the religious point of view, the members of St Anne (there are about two hundred and fifty of them) undertake to receive Communion on the first Wednesday of the month and to attend, as far as possible, the widows' Mass, which is sung every month for their departed husbands.

Every year there are two special retreats and, four times a year, children three months old are presented in the chapel by their mother, who pronounces the following consecration: "Heart of Jesus, friend of the workers, Immaculate Virgin, Mother of grace, St Joseph, patron of the workers' corporation, we consecrate to you this child whom God has given us. May he live and die a Christian, so as to win heaven."

Here I should have to enter into endless detail, to tell how the Association of St Anne periodically brings together its council, made up of women workers, with the committee of lady patronesses, that is, the Harmel ladies; how it takes care of the young mothers, who never lack attention, of the sewing rooms intended for the babies' layettes, of the sick, who are never left without visits, of large families, who might be in want; in a word, I should have to show how these Harmel ladies, with the help of the councillors of St Anne, spend the best of their time and find the delight of their lives in making sure that nothing is ever lacking, in any circumstance, to any branch, however far it spreads, of the great family of Val-des-Bois.

I shall stop at what I will call the women's section in the exhibition of the Christian works of Val-des-Bois. Oh! there are annexes, side sections, but I am running away!

There you would see the Third Order, that little elite troop of the sixty vivandières of the Val, whose task is to carry through the ranks the cordial of Christian austerity and humility. From time to time one of them leaves the ranks, but it is to embody, beneath the whiteness of a cornette, the sacrifices and the devotedness of charity.

We should also see, in detail, the housekeeping school, where all are taught knitting, sewing, mending and cutting out clothes, washing and laundering, cooking, housekeeping, hygiene and nursing in sickness; we should see that the women workers who wish to attend this school for at least an hour and a half a week may do so during working hours and without any reduction in wages.

We should see the girls' Choral Society, which rehearses twice a week and sings at Sunday Benediction and at all the devotions reserved for women; the section for amusements and games: all of them thriving associations, full of blossom, overflowing with life.

But it is high time to come to the chief of all the fundamental institutions of Val-des-Bois: the Men's Association. It has more than three hundred members, aged seventeen at least, and is constituted, in accordance with a French law of 21 March 1884, as a mixed union of employers and workers; its premises are the Catholic circle, a large and cheerful hall with many tables all around, a bar and, in the middle, six billiard tables. The members may meet there every evening and all day on Sunday, except during the services; in this way an effort is made to keep them away from the taverns, so numerous in the neighbourhood, and to maintain among them the spirit of brotherhood and solidarity. The result is most satisfactory: the circle is very well attended, on Sundays it is packed, and a worker said to me: "You should see it on a Sunday, Sir, see above all the Messrs Harmel, the Good Father at their head, mingling with the groups, joining in the games, the Good Father always hand in glove with the poorest, the most wretched, walking arm in arm with them, wonderfully skilled at drawing confidences from those who seem to him sad or unhappy." And from the way this good man said: you should see it on a Sunday, one understands that one misses a great deal by being at Val-des-Bois on a weekday.

The Men's Association meets on the first Sunday of every month in general assembly: there they hear a monthly report on the existing

institutions and works, a short lecture on the history of the Church, and another on a practical subject: saving, insurance, popular hygiene, how to invest funds, etc.

Twice a year the men make a retreat; four times a year there is a general Communion. On the Sunday after the feast of St Joseph, patron of the association, there is a Communion Mass, at ten o'clock a High Mass with music, the annual assembly with a general report on the state of the works, lunch in the union hall, and in the evening a procession in the gardens, illuminations and an instrumental concert.

The Men's Association is directed by the *Internal Council*, which has sixteen members, eleven of them workers; the Internal Council forms, so to speak, the trunk in which all the other councils meet, for one of its members is officially delegated to each of the secondary councils. Thus the Internal Council is always informed of everything that happens in each association. The consequence is that, despite the great number of works, unity is maintained, the spirit of union is safeguarded, and the Good Father, like the chaplain, by attending the single meeting of the Internal Council, is kept informed every week both of the working and of the slightest incidents of each association.

Many are the bodies directly attached to the men's circle; but I cannot linger; I mention them in passing:

The Band: it has 55 musicians; every Sunday in summer it gives a concert in the mill gardens; it takes part, needless to say, in all the meetings and all the corporative festivities.

The Choral Society: it has thirty-two members; half of them cannot read music, but that does not matter! It sings all the same, and not at all badly, so I am told.

The Orchestra: an embryo, if you like, since there are only twelve players, five of them violins. No matter, the little phalanx wins successes enough to make the Band jealous. And the workers' favour plainly goes to this kind of music, so rarely heard in the countryside.

The Gymnastics Society: it has about forty members and every year gives fine displays; on Sundays it often goes to the surrounding villages where, after showing off taut biceps and legs in the air on the public square, it restores itself with a snack paid for by the society's funds.

The Youth Society, which forms a section of the Catholic circle, having its own little room where it takes its lively and noisy recreation without disturbing the old guard in the midst of their game of piquet or the intricacies of dominoes.

The Reading Section, which distributes more than 125,000 Catholic newspapers a year and has organized a travelling library of four hundred books, which are renewed from time to time by exchanges with other Catholic libraries.

The Social Study Circle, an institution of the highest importance, says Mr Harmel, where all those who have the necessary abilities and gifts are trained and practise, through the study of social questions, for the struggle against socialism.

The Military Work, which looks after the young conscripts, seeing to it that they keep up their religious practices with the colours, and also ensuring that their wages continue to be paid to the worker soldiers doing their 28 days.

The Dramatic Society, which is made up exclusively of the young members of the men's circle. There is a theatrical performance every month. The great worry is to find plays requiring many actors, for those who love the boards are numerous. The censorship is represented by the chaplain.

The Rifle Club, where the young French worker learns to handle the weapons he will one day have to carry.

Finally, entering the stage last, as befits its legendary renown, *the Fire Brigade*, the senior of the societies of Val-des-Bois, since on its flag, beneath the motto "God, Family, Fatherland", we read this date: 1863.

Note that I say nothing here of the pious works properly so called, or else I should have to tell you: of the Conferences of St Vincent de Paul, of the confraternities of the Blessed Sacrament and of Our Lady of the Factory (Notre-Dame de l'Usine), of the Association of the Rosary, which takes care of the pilgrimages to Rome and Lourdes, of the Confraternity of St Joseph, of the Apostleship of Prayer, of *the League of Retreatants*, that work of the first order and of such decisive importance in our democratic societies, of *the Inner Association*, that pearl among works, which has some twenty members who, each time a difficulty, trials, illness or suffering befalls them, undertake to say: "Thank you, my God! how good you are to me, Lord; I thank you for thinking of me in order to try me!" A sublime work, a work of saints!



I am eager to answer your legitimate impatience by bringing these long wanderings through Val-des-Bois to an end with a sweeping glance at the economic institutions that flourish there.

Besides, we shall have to guide us a cicerone as pleasant as he is brisk, Mr Sacotte, general secretary of the economic works of Val-des-Bois.

Allow me to introduce him to you.

A big belly with a head on top: that is papa Sacotte, as the workers familiarly call him. If, in direct proportion to its mass, the belly first catches the attention, the head at once takes over. With his triple chin, his broad, plump cheeks, his round, thick, slightly turned-up nose, that broad face might perhaps not say much, were it not for the eyes. Oh! those eyes, those big mischievous eyes that are always twinkling, that sparkle like champagne. Watch out: when his eyelids rise and fall nervously and his large hands cross over his belly like hoops on a barrel, papa Sacotte is about to come out with one of his sallies! Do not look too mocking as you take in the vast rotundities of

his person, for he guesses your little teasing thoughts at the back of your mind and forestalls the blows with infinite wit and a consummate art of getting the laughers on his side.

In character papa Sacotte is as he is in body, that is, all round. All round and, I would add, all good, for he is a man of wit and a man of heart, two qualities that make him the best comrade of his employers and the universal friend of the workers.

And it is yet another of the Good Father's merits to have chosen for such delicate duties a man who so exactly represents the *right man in the right place*. For however eminent the qualities a leader may possess, if he is no judge of men, if he is mistaken in choosing those who are to be the intermediaries of his authority, his personal efforts will be hampered and his works compromised.

Now here again the Good Father has shown his full measure. He had the gift of placing, as a daily buffer between his workers and their employers, this man, who not only has heart, that essential quality for winning the worker, but also the wit and verve so precious in thorny, tense situations, where sometimes a clumsy or a happy word can ruin everything or save everything. Papa Sacotte has many a time made me reflect on the deep truth of this thought of Chamfort's: "He who does not know how to resort to a joke at the right moment very often finds himself in the unfortunate dilemma of being either false or harsh."

Let us follow, then, our pleasant cicerone.

Here is the mill: you see, the most cheerful site was chosen for it; right opposite the main exit, through which the workers come in and go out every day, smiling groves frame the horizon and, in the foreground, a charming picture, the Suippe, slightly checked in its course by a broad weir, forms a little white cascade against the green landscape. Inside, nothing is neglected to make the mill pleasant and healthy; the workrooms are spacious and well lit, they are six metres high, and the air is constantly renewed by fans, each of which re-

moves the foul air at the rate of ten thousand cubic metres an hour. As for the machines, all the most perfected devices for preventing and avoiding accidents are fitted to them, and the most meticulous precautions have been taken to stop the engines immediately in case of danger or accident.

Here, posted everywhere in conspicuous places, are *the workshop rules*, a true model of their kind, giving the labour contract every desirable guarantee. Here, taken at random, are some of the principal provisions.

Notice can be given by the worker or the employer only with eight days' warning, and only on the Thursday of each week. A happy measure which means that, with reflection, the worker very often goes back on a hasty decision that he would later regret. Only the employer may, for clearly specified reasons, namely immorality, drunkenness or obstinate refusal to obey, proceed to immediate dismissal without notice.

The separation of the sexes: not only are women forbidden to go, on any pretext whatever, into the men's workshops, and vice versa; but every day the women leave a few minutes before the men and, for coming back in, special doors are reserved for them.

Rest on Sundays and feast days is enforced absolutely, these days being reserved, says Art. 8 of the rules, for the service of God and for the family.

The pay is made up every fortnight and paid out on Thursday morning, market day at Warmeriville. The earnings of the members of one family are itemized and totalled on a single slip, which is handed to the head of the household or to his delegate, in this case almost always the mother of the family. Wise and prudent arrangements, which prevent the young from squandering their wages and concentrate the whole of the income in the hands of the family authority.

Workshop discipline: who does not know that this is one of the chief grievances of working populations, whose life is so often made intolerable by the tyranny of the foreman?

Here there is nothing of the kind. The foremen's right to fine the workers exists as it does elsewhere, but the fine becomes final only after the employer's approval. "Would you like," says Mr Sacotte, "a little figure that speaks volumes? The total of the fines has rarely exceeded fifty francs a year and, last year, in 1896, the fines amounted to four francs fifteen centimes. Ah! my dear Sir, if the mutual aid society, which receives the proceeds of the fines, had nothing else to live on, why! we should have to pay the sick workers in monkey's money." And as he said this, papa Sacotte's very expressive mimicry gave us a successful sample of that kind of money.

The workers' claims or protests are always received with the greatest goodwill. But there are two things on which the Good Father never compromises: immorality and any attack on religious freedom, by blasphemy or otherwise. One day two workers who had insulted an apprentice because he wore a scapular were laid off for twice twenty-four hours, with total loss of wages.

Recently a married foreman who had paid attentions to a young woman worker, going so far as to offer her a bag of sugared almonds in the mill itself, received the preliminary warning of final dismissal.

Another example that shows how every abuse is put down: a foreman was persecuting with his grudges an honest worker of long standing, harassing him endlessly with those thousand petty vexations that naturally end by exasperating a man. And indeed one day the worker, driven to the limit, went so far as to insult his superior grossly in front of his comrades. Dismissal was unavoidable, on pain of compromising authority and discipline. The Good Father, who knew everything that had gone on, summoned the foreman and the worker together and, after hearing them, summed up his decision in grounds equally severe for both parties, then pronounced his decision

in these terms: the worker will leave the mill in eight days, but the foreman will go at the same time as he! Let us add that neither of them did anything of the sort: the persecutor apologized to the persecuted, and yesterday's enemies became a pair of friends.

But, I said to Mr Sacotte, how can Mr Harmel be so well informed of everything that goes on?

Ah! my dear Sir, I shall tell you, and you will see one of the finest inventions of the Good Father, I mean the *factory council*. You ask me what it is? Listen carefully.

As you can see, the mill is divided into eighteen large workrooms, each of which forms a separate section of the establishment. All these sections are called upon by the Good Father to appoint a factory councillor, who must be an ordinary worker, foremen being excluded; the women's sections appoint women councillors. That is the factory council, which meets every fortnight under the chairmanship of the employer. Now, what do they do at these meetings? Each one comes to report on what is happening in his section, on the wishes of his comrades, the complaints they make, the improvements they would like: a worker goes astray, makes irreligious or immoral remarks: he is reported; another is troubled or persecuted: it is mentioned; a foreman oversteps the limits of his authority: make no mistake, he will be brought up before the factory council. In a word, this original piece of machinery, for which the Good Father deserves all the credit, since he invented it, ensures that the mill runs from one end to the other without any abuse or any tyranny being possible, and in such conditions that the employer always has, everywhere, an eye and an ear.

"Is that not fine?" exclaims Mr Sacotte. "And to think that there are people, not at the Val but elsewhere, who have called it a council of informers! Come now, is the deputy who goes to the Palais Bourbon to say what is happening and what is wanted in his department an informer? Why! it would be enough to make these factory

councils general in industry to do away, at a single stroke, with a great many grievances legitimately put forward by the workers.”

You see this bell? It is one that papa Sacotte never hears: it rings for the doctor!

The doctor comes to the mill every day and, when this bell goes, anyone at all who has his little ailment can go to the consultation. If the worker has sick people at home, he writes his name on the doctor's board when he arrives at work; the doctor then makes a home visit. All this is free, and so are the medicines, which come from the dispensary you saw at the Sisters'; medicines and doctor are paid for by the Mutual Aid Society.

The Mutual Aid Society is one of the oldest institutions of the Val. It is the only one that encroaches on the worker's freedom, in the sense that he is obliged to belong to it. Membership entitles him, besides free medical care and medicines, to a generous cash allowance in sickness, to special immediate relief in case of industrial accidents and, finally, at death, to all the costs of the funeral service and of Christian burial. In these sad circumstances it is Mr Sacotte himself who takes the necessary steps and completes the painful formalities that a death requires.

Saving, too, holds a choice place among the institutions of Val-des-Bois.

A school savings bank is established in the schools. How many little sous, each one standing for some treat given up and a victory won by the child over his young and innocent passions! The results are astonishing: in 1896 two hundred and twenty-three passbooks showed school savings of 5,589 francs 30 centimes!

As for the workers, they are all free to leave their money, up to a certain sum, on deposit at the mill, at an interest rate of five per cent a year, and the accounts committee strives to find profitable investments, in mortgages and otherwise, which it points out to the workers who have the necessary savings. To show what the spirit of thrift

and saving is at Val-des-Bois, it will be enough to quote one figure: the workers save on average sixty thousand francs a year, which represents fifteen per cent of their wages.

What happily makes saving easier, moreover, is the *cooperative society* — founded with a capital of 20,000 francs divided into 200 shares — and above all its natural corollary, payment in cash.

The cooperative appreciably lowers the cost of living. It includes the bakery — we visited it; it runs on electricity; the bread there is excellent and is sold by weight, going on the scales for each customer, who pays in cash with his member's voucher — it also includes shops for clothing, footwear, linen, hosiery, etc. The workers tried a butcher's shop; they had to give it up, as in many places, for that matter, since it produced nothing but losses. However, they did not sit idle: an agreement was made with a butcher, who agreed to supply all the meat to this large clientele at a substantial discount on the normal price.

The cooperative also makes direct purchases: in 1896 it concluded a contract for wine from Champagne at twenty-seven and a half centimes a litre, delivered carriage paid; the worthy secretary quotes me this detail with delight.

The cooperative does eighty thousand francs' worth of business and makes six thousand francs of profit, one eighth of which goes to the shareholders and seven eighths to the cooperators, that is, to the buyers. The society's reserve amounts to 7,011.20, or about a third of the capital. — Ah! he was quite right, Mr Sacotte, when, after explaining to me what I have just said, he exclaimed: "My dear Sir, that is what is called keeping the little pot boiling!"

We were about to leave the workrooms of the mill when, wishing to clear up a detail that had already struck me, I turned towards a young woman worker who wore on her breast, hanging from a blue ribbon, a silver medal. "What is that?" I asked Mr Sacotte; "is it the feast day of some sodality today?" — "A feast day, oh my good Sir!

but look over there at all those girls with green ribbons: they are members of the Holy Angels; the one you are pointing out to me is a Child of Mary; over there Mrs Gilmaire, with her violet ribbon, is a member of St Anne's. You see, nobody here is afraid to wear her little spiritual livery. They have it on always and everywhere, in the street as here, at work as on a walk, on weekdays as on Sundays.

"Ah! those who dared to do that some twenty years ago were brave women; they must have heard some hard things, but they persevered, for they were valiant souls!

"Today nobody is surprised at it any more; our dear members are proud of their colours and, why! I really think they may be prouder of their ribbon than thirty-six scoundrels who belong to the Legion of Honour!"

Mr Sacotte now leads us into his office, which is truly, and indeed is called, *the People's Secretariat*. There the worker can turn at any time and in full confidence in all his difficulties: formalities, marriages, lawsuits, problems with inheritances, family councils, fire insurance; everything ends up there and gives the good secretary the most varied and disparate occupations. "You see," says Mr Sacotte — who readily indulges in little classical reminiscences — "I am a man, and nothing human is foreign to me."

Besides, the post of secretary of the social works of Val-des-Bois is no sinecure. The many notices sent out every day to the members of each council, attendance at these meetings, the writing of the minutes and the monthly publication of the customaries already make Mr Sacotte one of the busiest wheels of the mill. For, mark this well, and it is essential: all these works we have just seen, all these institutions, do not exist only on paper; they run without interruption and prosper constantly under the unceasing impulse of the employers and of their devoted auxiliaries, the Father Chaplains and Mr Sacotte. I wished to see the reality of things for myself, perhaps with a certain indiscretion, according to the customary. On Wednesday 25 August,

a meeting of a section of the relief society was to be held at six in the evening in Mr Sacotte's office; I went there at five past six; the section was there, assembled, in full deliberation.

At the risk of never finishing, I must at last say a final word about these two essential matters: the wages and the pensions of the workers.

Wages at the Val correspond to the most perfect Christian conception of the remuneration of human labour: Mr Harmel pays the family wage. That is to say, when the employer has paid each one the average wage that rewards his work, he does not consider that he has done everything: he singles out those whose family burdens are so heavy that the work of their hands is not enough to provide for them. Mr Harmel reckons that in every working-class household at least sixty centimes per head per day are needed to live decently. A worker has eight children; with his wife and himself they are ten; this worker must have six francs a day to live; if his work brings him only four francs, Mr Harmel makes up the two francs. There is no need to dwell on or extol the great moral side of this system, which means that each child born in the worker's home brings with it a little more happiness and a little more well-being.

Do not say: that is easy when one has money. No; I have already said by what voluntary tax on their own luxury these Messrs Harmel create the ways and means of supporting the works and, for my part, I declare, seeing the luxury of many industrialists who have eight hundred, nine hundred, a thousand workers, industrialists whose household costs forty, fifty, sixty thousand francs a year, that there is not one of them who, by reducing his sumptuary expenses, not by three quarters, nor by half, but by a quarter only, could not carry out many of these reforms and bestow the same benefits.

Finally — and this finally is the last — the workers of Val-des-Bois are *insured against industrial accidents*; in case of permanent incapacity for work incurred in service at the mill, they receive a pen-

sion of three hundred to seven hundred francs. Moreover, the workers are *pensioned* in their old age. A provident fund, financed by the employers alone, ensures an old-age annuity, sufficient to live on, to old workers who have thirty years of service at the mill and can no longer work.

I have not finished, but I am bringing this to a close.

The limits I have set myself hardly allow me to linger over the reflections that crowd in when I consider, in the panorama of memory, the great things seen at Val-des-Bois.

Certainly it is not given to everyone to achieve the superb work of Mr Harmel; besides, in all things one must take account of the circumstances of time and persons, and of the special conditions of the surroundings in which one lives.

But all of us, every one, have something to glean from the work of Val-des-Bois to raise our hearts and our energies towards the duties and the works that the social conditions of our time demand.

And without being able, as I should wish, to draw from all this the practical applications that the subject calls for, I shall sum up by saying that, in the economic field, the work of Mr Harmel is indeed, in fact and in reality, the finest conception of Christian genius.

And my memory goes out, enthusiastic and admiring, to this humble man who is so great, to this rich man who is by his own will so poor, to this employer who is an apostle, to this Christian who is a saint.

And I shall always remember the intense emotion that took away our voices at the moment of the farewell handshake and made us take leave of the Good Father with the rather foolish air of people who do not know how to say: thank you.

But perhaps the Good Father was not deceived; strong emotions are silent, great enthusiasms are mute.

Bruges, September 1897

