

near-by village. They have had sixteen children, of whom fourteen are living in excellent health, four boys and ten girls, the oldest 20 years, and the youngest two years.

Then there were the old people—Father Brian, lively at 87, whose forefathers have been holding the farm La Boule for one hundred and seventy years; the Guittney brothers, farmers at Metite-Masure from father to son, for a hundred and fifty years; the Recoquillies, who remain at La Caillauderie the freehold established by their ancestors a hundred and seventy years ago; Father Germain Francheteau, so merry despite his 73 years, who has been for 54 years chief herdsman at Bois Rouard château.

At the banquet, which was to have been presided over by René Bazin, of the Académie Française, the host proposed a toast which, to Jean Clair-Guyot who quoted it, had almost a "patriarchal savor." The Marquis explained to his hearers how he and the Marquise had wanted first of all to give the Beilverts a party not only because they had been honored by the Académie Française, but also because they were farmers of the highest type, hard-working, clever, and good Christians. Then there were the Recoquillies, the Briands and the Guittneys, he explained, who had been for a hundred and fifty years in a very close union with his family: to such a point, in fact, that it seemed to him there was by this time really only one large family, in which each member understood very clearly his responsibilities to all the others. Then there was fine old Father Briand, born right here, who had been one of the main factors in the prosperity of Bois Rouard. He had worked hard all his life, and, in the presence of his children and grandchildren, it was good to honor such a life of service to the community. In conclusion, he said:

"To-day is no more than a continuation of yesterday. I remember one day after the death of my uncle, Count Juigne, how I was going over the property with old Father Gouard whom you all knew so well, and he turned to me suddenly and said: 'How glad the old Count would be to see how you are keeping everything up.' An expression which carries well the thought of that fine old man who in his heart meant 'Nothing has been upset here.' I have done all I could that nothing might be upset here, and this family heritage of which I am really the trustee will be transmitted intact with all its responsibilities and communal duties to my son, who would be with us to-day were he not at sea fulfilling his duty as a sailor. You have all helped me in my job, may your children help my son in his."

That such an almost unbelievably feudal state of affairs in present-day France could exist to the mutual satisfaction of everyone comes as a shock to various writers commenting upon it. To the writer in *L'Illustration*, however, it does not seem so strange, for he concludes:

Family pride, love for the land—two virtues which are fortunately not so rare in France as people think. It is by fidelity to these great traditions that there is perpetuated down through successive generations the power and vitality of a race.

In another part of France, family pride and love for the land appears to have reached its climax as far as dirt farmers are concerned. A family was discovered, of whom it was actually claimed that they had been working the same land for more than a thousand years! In 923 Alfred the Great had recently died, the Norsemen were raiding Rome, and Louis the Blind, a descendant in the fourth generation from Charlemagne, was Roman Emperor and King of the Franks. French writers point out that a family with such a record as real dirt farmers, constitute the true aristocracy of France, and actually antedates most of the royal houses of Europe, past or present, including Bourbons, Plantaganets, Stuarts, Hohenzollerns, Romanoffs, and Hapsburgs.

However that may be, something much more illustrative of the real thing to most people happened recently up near the Belgian border in the province of Nord. Madame Degroote, a little old lady living at Cassel, was astounded to learn on her birthday that she had just been made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor. So far as she knew, she had done nothing unusual—just run a big farm all her life, and raise a family of boys and girls. Why, then, the Cross of the Legion? Here is the citation:

"The Widow Degroote, an agriculturalist of Cassel, Nord, aged to-day seventy-four years, is the mother of fourteen children, of whom five died for France. All her surviving sons are farmers. While they were with the colors, she ran the farm all by herself, up to 1919. It was not till then that she retired to one of the most unassuming houses of Cassel, after having given more than sixty years of her life to agriculture."

The same writer we have quoted before, journeyed up to Cassel to see this old lady. There she was sitting at the front window, watching the corner of the street where the most people went by. "Bolt upright in her black gown trimmed with crêpe, one bit of color at the breast being the ribbon of the order of Excellence in Agriculture, Madame Degroote answered my questions in her patois," says the writer. She was a little bewildered, but with the aid of a much-elated daughter, she satisfied the curiosity of the gentleman from Paris. She apologised for not wearing her Cross of the Legion of Honor, so he could see how fine it looked, but you see it had not yet been sent. She was rather excited this particular afternoon because she had just received a letter of congratulation from a fine young British officer who had been billeted with her during the war. Eventually she was brought to talk about herself, and the "Gentleman from Paris" learned that it was actually "back in eighteen seventy-four" that she and her young husband started running the "Hamerovek" farm, as they call it in that province. When her husband died in 1912 there were eleven husky boys and two girls to help mother carry on. The writer continues:

With the older children, she continued to run the farm, whose thirty-five acres were producing splendidly. But in 1914, at the declaration of war, Madame Degroote suddenly found herself almost alone. Ten of her sons and her son-in-law went off to war! Then there happened on the "Hamerovek" farm what was to be seen almost everywhere else in France. The women toiled desperately hard to keep their whole life's work from going to pieces. Up to the spring of 1918 it was simply a hard task, kept up without a sign of weakening, and in defiance of fate's most terrible blows. Four boys were killed on the field of battle, and a fifth suffered his life away on the farm where he had been brought back mortally wounded. In April, 1918, the situation was suddenly menaced with more actual dangers. The formidable German drive for the North Sea ports brought enemy troops up to the very base of Mount Kemmel! (Mount Kemmel is still vividly remembered by a great many Americans.) What difference did that make to Mother Degroote? She and her daughters went on working under shell-fire. A year later, in 1919, her six living sons were demobilized, and the old lady farmer decided to take some rest at last. She was seventy years old, so her youngest son, Gaston, took over the running of the home farm, while the four other boys started on various other farms.

That was all there was to say, and as the interviewer left, Mother Degroote moved her chair back to the front window again, and her twinkling eyes peered through the lace curtains out to the "four square yards of street where the world goes by." The fact that appears to have impressed the interviewer most of all as he walked back through the quaint little streets of Cassel was this:

Madame Degroote does not understand, and probably never will understand, just how France has come to give her that little red ribbon. To her a Knight of the Legion of Honor is some great man in civil life who has done fine big things for the Republic. Or it is a soldier who in war has fought very bravely for his country. But that the President of France would thus decorate an old lady just from the farm, merely because she has tilled the soil hard for more than sixty years, and did not stop even for the German cannon—that she smilingly refuses to believe. No, no. She is very proud of the great honor that has come to her, but she understands that is really a decoration, in the person of their old Mama, of five brave boys who died in battle.—The *Literary Digest*.

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