

The Peasant Women of France

THE peasant women of France, on whom, for the last two years, has rested a heavy weight of anxiety and labor, have, as a rule, proved themselves equal to the claims made upon their endurance.

On August 2, 1914, when the church-bells rang over the fields of France the call to arms, the women, stifling their sobs, bravely faced the future. They too were to have their share of sorrow, but even the most pessimistic among them failed to realize the extent of the responsibilities that the war was to entail. Since then more men have been summoned to join the army, so that today all those who are over nineteen and under forty-eight years of age are militarized. In many cases both father and son are serving at the front, and in consequence the portion of the women is the heavier. In many homes there are empty places that will never again be filled, and to physical weariness is added anguish, bereavement and desolation. Two years of war have greatly increased the labors of those at home, yet the peasant women of France have not faltered, they are grappling bravely with the hardships of their lot. From Auvergne, Savoy, the Pyrenees, from the hilly districts of Central France and the plains of Flanders, we hear of them bringing in the hay and the harvests, assisted by feeble old men and small children. It is a pathetic sight to see how they fight against discouragement and fatigue, against disappointment, and against the secret grief that is eating out many a heart. France's women are as brave as her men.

The wounded peasants, who fill our hospitals, have proved themselves brave soldiers, steady under fire, uncomplaining and patient; but when they are lying, still and stricken, on their hospital beds, their whole souls go out to their native villages. The love of the French peasant for the particular portion of French soil that he calls his own, for the corner of land he himself has tilled, is extraordinarily deep and tender; few realized before the war its strength and its tenderness. Maimed by his wounds, he wonders how the fields are looking at home; his anxiety for the harvest becomes a fixed idea, a haunting fear. He knows how feeble are the hands that are striving to care for the interests that the war has obliged him to desert. But it is here that the women's courage and activity come in as a glad surprise. A farmer from the country near Bordeaux showed me a letter from his wife, in which, with honest pride, she told him how, assisted by her husband's aged father, she had got in the harvest and was then ploughing the fields: "It may be that the furrows are not quite so straight as when you were at home, but you must not mind this, for the work has been done, and I may say that nothing has been neglected." This letter is one of many.

In Poitou, young girls have learned to use the plough, which in this particular district is drawn by six oxen. They were awkward at first but have learnt by experience, and last year a traveler in Poitou was amazed to see two young girls of seventeen and eighteen manage their team of oxen as if they had never done anything else. In the hospital, where it has been my privilege to make closer acquaintance with our wounded fighting men, lay a farmer from Central France who had lost his leg. One day, lately, when I visited him, I was surprised to see, fastened to the head of his bed, some fine ears of corn. "I was very anxious about the harvest," he explained, "and kept asking my wife, who has to work our farm alone, how she managed. The other day she came to see me. 'There,' she said, 'is a specimen of the corn that I sowed in the field you know of. It is, I think, quite a credit to me, and you must not worry any more.' With that

she pulled out the bunch of corn that you see. It comes from our own field and I like to look at it." The good man, for the time being, forgot his infirmity, between his pride in his wife and in his corn. The product of his own little field was a potent solace for pain. It was a message of sympathy from the land itself.

Sometimes the work is carried on not only under difficulties, but in the teeth of positive danger. Only yesterday, an English officer told me he was sent to buy a large crop of clover, standing uncut in a field not far from Arras and close to the firing line. The proprietress of the field was a young woman of twenty-five, a widow of the war. The officer and his interpreter concluded the bargain in the field itself. The clover was being mowed by a machine in charge of a very old man, and the young woman walked close by, carefully watching the ground. She explained that this particular field was close to a high road, where troops passed continually, and that the soldiers often threw bits of iron, empty tins and other rubbish into the clover. She herself picked out these bits of metal, which would have injured the mower. The officer and his companion watched her stooping at every turn and diligently picking up the dangerous refuse. Suddenly a shell, first one, then a second, then a third, swept across the sky above the group. The horses, mad with fear, reared and kicked; the Englishman and his interpreter threw themselves at their heads and with difficulty restrained them; a dog, trembling with fear, crouched low, almost under the machine; the young woman and her aged companion never turned a hair. When there came a pause, she quietly said: "We might go on now," and the feeble old man and she *did* go on, regularly, slowly, methodically. She continued to watch, to stoop, to pick up the objectionable bits of iron, as if no shrieking message of death had disturbed the peace of that summer afternoon. "I shall never forget that woman's pluck," said my informant. In certain parts of the front, the women creep out at night to bring in the harvest; during the day they lie low, while the German shells spread terror and destruction. At night the danger is generally less, and these tenacious workers do their best to save the crops from loss and waste.

Instances of their steady courage might be multiplied indefinitely, to their honor and that of France. In a certain village near Chartres, a humble peasant woman does another kind of work. The *curé* of this particular village is engaged in military service and his parish is cared for, in consequence, by an old priest, who, being already in charge of another village, can say Mass for his new parishioners only on Sundays. This being the case, there was difficulty about reserving the Blessed Sacrament. The village, though situated in a district that is far from religious, has an excellent spirit and the people are constant in their attendance at services. A quiet old maid, a peasant by birth, who earns her bread by ironing at the "château" close by, came forward and promised that on four afternoons a week public prayers should be recited before the Blessed Sacrament. We assisted at one of these services. Léonie arrived, a small, slight figure, with a pale face framed in the peasant *coiffe* of the women of La Beauce. With her came old men and children, and women, old and young. She knelt in their midst and led the prayers: the rosary, the Way of the Cross, litanies to the Saints of France, who were called upon to assist their country in its hour of supreme necessity. The people present answered earnestly, and one felt that through the lips of these untutored peasants spoke the real soul of France, the devout, the simple, the believing soul, which the tragedy of war has brought nearer to God and to the old Faith, inherited from generations of believing ancestors.

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