

THE WOMEN OF FRANCE.

I.

The most impressive and significant figure in France today is in bronze. It is that of Rodin's Penseur. He sits at the foot of the Pantheon, at the top of Mt. Geniviere, with bent head and brooding brow looking over Paris and France, the very embodiment of the question which lies deepest in the soul of this land:- How now? What are we to do?

Coming upon him unexpectedly as I did after a few hours in a once well-known and always well-beloved quarter, after looking on street after street in which not over one-third of the once busy shops were open, after passing point after point which had been riddled by bombardment, after finding all the gay, aspiring beautiful youth that once made this the most joyous spot in France gone, the great figure seemed to be asking the same question which had taken possession of me,- What are they to do? Where are they to begin?

More and more as I look about and ask this question, I am convinced that if this battered, rent thing is to be restored,-- and it must be restored for the sake of the world's civilization -- it is the French women that must mainly do it; not the politicians, let them do their best - or worst - but it is not they that will lift and save France. It has got to be done from the bottom, down where people live in love and labor. And it is the women who will play the chief part there. Their task in the peace which has come is not unlike that of the poilu in the war that is past.

They come to this work with the most terrible handicaps. Indeed it is these handicaps which forces them to the work. First, they have lost their men. When the war began there were let us say 20,000,000 women in France. The figures that we get now of the actual death through war are not entirely reliable, but



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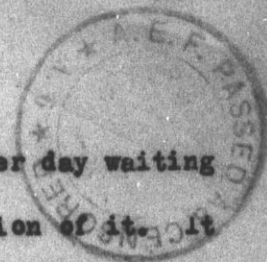
in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies they are speaking of 1,400,000 killed. And they are the very flesh of the flesh and heart of the heart of French womanhood, for they are the young husbands and those that were to be husbands. The great body of the killed have been the young - the working young. That means that mothers who were relying on sons have lost them, that wives and children who depended on husbands and fathers are without them. One can hardly understand how terrible that loss is unless he understands something of the French family, that thing which in our ignorance we so often declare does not exist. It does not exist anywhere in any country in a more intimate and responsible fashion, with a fuller recognition of its relation to society, than in France. The visitor sees little of it. It is like the gardens in the French cities and towns. "They have no yards," I hear our Americans saying again and again. They do not know that behind these rows of housefronts are almost invariably little gardens, cherished, furnished, gay and always in use when the weather permits. The family is still here in France as is the garden, but terribly lacerated. It is heart-breaking to go into these houses, and have them show you the lists of those near them that are dead, appalling lists sometimes in length as well as in the nearness of the relation.

These women are not only facing the problem of being stripped of their men, but they are facing the agonizing one of making a life for the great numbers that have come back to them more or less mutilated, the blind, the legless, the armless, those whose brains have been stupified by gas or horror. These come back into families worn down by four years of privation and suffering, and the women must somehow build them up, help them to learn to live. For the most part the men are brave, at least on the surface. There is an organization here of blinded soldiers who publish a little paper, "Rire Quoi Meme" (Laugh All The Same). That is the outward spirit, the face they show the world. But this blind husband or son or father in his home is not going always to "laugh just the same."

One sees plenty of evidences of the difficulties. The other day waiting for a motorbus near the garden of the Luxembourg I had an illustration of it. It was Sunday and coming down the street out for their regular Sunday promenade, that is taking up their old habits at once, came a woman of 25 or 30, her arm linked in that of a blind man, his eyes still bound up. The two were walking gaily, laughing heartily, with every appearance of old time Sunday holiday spirit. I don't know what it was that fell or exploded just then, perhaps the tire of a passing automobile, but whatever it was, it threw the blind man into panic. He turned white, staggered, gasped the woman. It was beautiful to see and hear her. "There, there, my boy," she said to him. "Don't be foolish, You, you who were not afraid of all the guns of the Germans to jump at a little noise in a peaceful street when I have hold of your arm. That is not courage. Come on now, forget it. You are with me, you are safe. Shame on you." He promptly took the cue, straightened up bravely, and smilingly went on.

These were common people, probably before the man went away a little merchant just commencing his business. But you see the same thing on the other side of the water in the Champs Elysees quarter. I have seen elegant little women there who probably never before in their lives had had a care or responsibility trying to teach husbands or brothers or perhaps lovers who had lost a leg to walk. I saw one the other day, a handsome gentleman, correctly and fashionably clad in civilian clothes, with a little woman by his side trying their utmost to carry the thing off with style as well as courage.

One can easily imagine how this problem of teaching the mutilated man to go about courageously under his handicap is complicated often by the mood of the individual. They don't all take it like the little blind merchant and the elegant gentleman. And the woman thus has the problem not only of the physical handicap but of the moral and spiritual. Nothing but great courage and common sense is going to see her through.



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This woman who so often has been stripped of her man or who has him back more or less mutilated, has again and again in all classes been separated from her child. The war cut down her resources, destroyed her trade, shut up the shop in which she and her husband had always worked together. She closed her home, put out her child and went to work. The separation has been hard, how hard one can see on any Sunday afternoon at any one of the institutions where the children are grouped. If the mother is within reach she always goes, carries little presents, cuddles and ^{loves} cons the little one until visiting hours are over. Then come tears on one side and screams on the other. This woman wants her child back, but she must have some kind of a home for that and for a home there must be money, and for money there must be work.

Whatever her handicap, the death of her man, his mutilation or the loss of support, for the great mass of the women of France, town and country, the great need is work - and it is for the most of them all they ask. "Give us work and we will do our part," an intelligent woman of education and refinement said to me as she bent over the child she was visiting at one of these blessed centers supported and directed by American generosity and devotion.

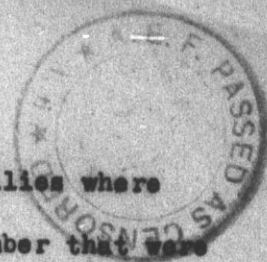
She must have work to do her part in re-creating France, and there's the rub.

Begin at the bottom and look for a moment at the labor situation for the masses of these women. It is an old story - the way they ran into the munition factories and indeed into every kind of undertaking which contributed directly or indirectly to war needs. It is true that in France the upper class women did not seek the factory as in England, but great numbers came from all other kinds of employments, many of them driven out of these employments because the war had made them useless. They came in great numbers from the country, from fourteen or fifteen years up. Now these factories have closed and a very pretty situation is resulting in the cities and industrial centers. The women of twenty-five or over

that have been a little steadied by life and who probably have families where they came from are going back. About one-third they say of the number that were in war munition works in and around Paris and that have been discharged have returned to their homes. The other two thirds, practically all of the young women, those who went in at fifteen or sixteen, are refusing to leave the city. There is unquestionably a group of those that are refusing because they have taken on the vices of the city.

The spread of drunkenness among French working woman since the war broke out is something that is worrying everybody who comes in contact with it, the more because she has been a sober woman, content with her glass of wine or her drop of cognac, but many of these young munition workers have become drunkards and have taken on the free street life that goes with it. They won't leave Paris now because they are what they are. You find them doing all kinds of things. I ran into a bevy of them the other day before a famous church, selling little mementos of a famous saint. They had been nice girls once, but you knew by their faces what they had become. I talked with them a while. They were quite frank. They would never leave Paris for the country, it was too slow there. They would find something better than selling reliques soon. Now one can imagine how the Commission on Woman's Work is exercised over this group, for it means that if it somehow cannot be saved, most of the girls will land in that terrible lowest life of Paris, a life which for pure brutality I fancy cannot be equalled in any other city of the world. If one wants to know what it is, he should read that powerful and terrible book "Le Tigre et le Coquelicot." There you have what they tell me is a true picture of the ferocity and bestiality of what we know as the Apaches. To keep these young girls that the war has already so injured from that group is no small problem.

But if some of these women are remaining because they have succumbed to the vices of Paris, there is another much greater group who stay because they are ambitious to rise. There is no doubt about it. The modern spirit is working hard





among these French women who have for centuries so contentedly remained where they were born doing the thing they had learned to do. They are not satisfied to be working women in the old way. They want to better themselves. Few of these girls who have been released from munition factories are willing to go into domestic service, though they might there earn more money. Indeed at the moment a maid can among visiting foreigners at least, almost make her own price. They tell me at the employment bureau for women which was opened by the Labor Ministry two years ago particularly to take care of the labor situation among women, that there are several objections in the girl's head:- The hours are practically unlimited; there is a certain social disadvantage; you are less free; you have no opportunity to "get on". It sounds familiar! It's the domestic service problem in the United States beginning here as a direct result of the war experiences of women. There is only one solution for the ^{entire} ~~entire~~ country. The employment must correct its disadvantages - get itself on a business basis, make a dignified trade of itself.

And they don't want to sew! While the war was on the munition factory had for the French working woman a real fascination. She left her employment for it. Indeed so many women went out of the clothing industries that it was ^{at times} very difficult to get enough employees for work on uniforms. They preferred munitions, as it was more interesting, more exciting and a change. Now the munition works are closing and the woman wants still less to sew - or do anything she did before. If she had a good trade before the war, as so many of them did, we may wonder why they do not return. ^{One} The reason is that so many of these trades are slow in re-opening, cannot do so until the army is demobilized. Another is that they have not only lost the taste but the touch for their old handicraft. Making shells spoils the fingers for making lace; cleaning streets and sewing up sand bags ruins a hand for dainty silk weaving. They're spoiled for their old trades. It is one of those unexpected fruits of war that will be realized more poignantly still as time goes on and as the men return.



So here we have it - the new trade shut down, the old one lost and a new ambition born. This ambition is epitomized in a word which you hear on every side, Re-education. It is the necessity and aspiration of the moment. Hundreds of these working women look to clerical work to satisfy their new need and hope. Of course few of them have a proper instruction to become useful clerks, but they learn a little typewriting and filing and take the examination necessary. In the first half of 1918, there were over 62,000 applications for office work of some kind made at the woman's employment bureau of the War Department. Only 9,000 of these could be placed. Some 16,000 of these were of the class that I mentioned, women who wanted to improve themselves and yet had little instruction. At the same time, not one-tenth of the women offering themselves as stenographers were really skilled.

This ambition of the working woman to make her way into the clerical class has little promise at the moment. The gradual closing down of the war machine is already beginning to displace French clerks and stenographers. A French friend of mine who has sixty or seventy skilled ^{woman} typists and clerks tells me that he knows that in a short time he will have to cut them down by 80 per cent. He has warned the women but they are taking the stand now that the state having employed them, must take care of them. They are not going to make efforts themselves to get anything outside! This is one of the weaknesses of the woman's labor situation that you encounter everywhere. The state must take care of her. I have run across it again and again in the employment bureaus where women who have passed an examination and have been put on the lists sit squarely in their chairs and announce to the directors that they will not look for work outside, that it is the business of the department to find it for them!

employment office

All of the work in the Government Labor Department so far as it concerns women, and indeed a great deal with concerns men, is done by women. Go for instance to the employment bureau which the Labor Ministry started two years ago, and you will find everybody but the director a woman, most of them competent. They handle the



flood of seekers for work with both intelligence and kindness. It is a very trying proposition now that the work to give is so much less than the work that is asked. Take a place like the bureau which recruits for secretary and office work, and where examinations are held for every candidate. It is a most refreshing thing to see the satisfaction which these busy, tired women have in every woman who really passes. A pretty scene in which I was included simply because I happened to be standing around at the time illustrates what I mean. A woman of perhaps 35 had come with her boy, a fine little fellow of 12, to see if she had passed. The woman was waiting with the greatest anxiety for as she explained to me, her husband who had been a schoolmaster had been wounded, and he would never be able to do that work again. He was going to reeducate himself. He was a brave fellow and he would do it, but now it was for her to find something. She had learned stenography and she thought she had learned it well, but of course one newer knew. These examinations were very hard. The papers finally came and she had passed. Three or four women connected with the machinery of the office gathered about her laughing and congratulating her. The boy danced up and down. The woman was the picture of happiness. Now she was the protege of the state, and her faith that the state would find her something was unbounded. One can only hope that it does, and soon. And if it does I know that the same joyous congratulations will take place in that little employment bureau.

The probability is now, however, that she will have to wait, and perhaps wait long, for I turned from her to a woman experienced and much better educated than she, who had been waiting a month for a position. She was one of the cases of which you find numbers now in France, a French woman formerly employed in some one of the American departments. There have been hundreds of them. The director of this very bureau told me that he had himself placed over a thousand, but that as we were now closing down they were rapidly being thrown out of position.

The necessity of using French women in building up ourwork in France is obvious enough. At the start we had no women personnel. It was necessary to draw

from the ranks of the French. And we have used them for a variety of work. In the Paris headquarters of the Red Cross today there are about nine hundred. They include telephone girls, the women at the information desks, postal clerks, telegraphers, filing clerks, typists, as well as those in the positions of skilled secretaries. There are a few women of particular training and ability in advisory capacities. They have been most valuable in the personnel department, for they are better judges of their own countrywomen than we can possibly be. It is practically impossible indeed for the plausible but unskilled to pass by these women. They know all their ^{of their countrywomen} shall we say, ways, and are not to be deceived.

~~This same class has been of unusual service in the children's department of which Dr. Lucas has been the head because of their warm sympathies, and their clear understanding as well as their beautiful gratitude for what we have been able to do.~~ Out of this daily contact of the women of the two countries in our many departments of work in France results are bound to come. The attitude towards work and the methods of work are very different. Practically no French woman ever finds her whole life in work as so many Americans ^{women} do. They are amazed at many of the things which we require. Our severe business conscience is I think rarely intelligible to them. They love to lighten labor by floods of talk, discussion, compliments, interchanges of courtesy, ^{etc} that is no matter what the work is they feel that they have a right to get fun out of it. Business is business to us, and we frown on this effort to lighten it, preferring to take our fun after hours and with other companions. Perhaps both sides will be benefited. Who knows? One thing is certain. Our methods of work are making an impression on these young women and when we shall have left the country and they are back in their own bureaus, there is no doubt in my mind but they will adopt many of our methods, but only after much discussion and skillful adaptation so as not to interfere too greatly with the French attitude towards labor!

(In another article I shall speak of some of the leaders among these women.)