

THREE WOMEN.

Eighteen months ago it was a pretty rural village, this unlovely expanse of wreckage just behind the firing-line. The jagged stone walls that rise, gaunt and perilous, from amidst the litter of building stuffs on the ground are all that remain of homes—homes that once were bright and warm with love and laughter.

Not a whole house stands. If here four walls remain, the roof has gone; if there a few slates still find a precarious support, one of the gables is missing. Nor is there any trace of the little gardens that were; the piles of debris and the derelict walls are surrounded by a wilderness of mud.

Hardly does the place afford a decent shelter for a dog, and troops cannot be billeted there. Occasionally you will find a few odd soldiers—the cooks, pioneers, etc., belonging to battalions in the trenches—herding together in the dug-outs that have been formed in sundry out-of-the-way corners, but that is all. Yet is Cambrin a busier place in its death than it was in life.

For from it a communication trench leads to the firing-line, and so there are always troops coming and going, and by day and by night fatigue parties are assembled there—perhaps to unload material required in the trenches, perhaps to carry it up to the firing-line. Periodically the enemy sends over a few shells on the off-chance of there being troops collected at this point, and so it is that the village has been reduced to a mere geological pancake on the earth's surface.

Of civilian life there is hardly a trace; all the former inhabitants have fled long ago, all save one.

“Granny” the men call her, and her grey hairs might justify the title—a little, wizened, bowed, old woman, with an uncertain, faltering step, and eyes dulled by looking over-long on life. On her arm she carries a basket containing two or three dozen small, green, hard pears, and these she sells to the men—three pears for two sous. She shuffles along the muddy road, picking her steps as carefully as she may, while British Tommies, perhaps enjoying a few minutes' freedom from a fatigue, hail her with a “Bon jour, Madame!” or “Hi, granny, donnay-mwaw some o' your peers!”

Sometimes the hiss of a shell startles the air overhead, and there will be a burst of shrapnel

perhaps only a hundred yards away, and Madame will pause and look around her, then shake her head and say to some prospective customer, "No bon! No bon!" and Tommy will reply, "Oui, oui, Madame, no bloomin' bon!"

When her basket has been emptied she totters along the muddy road to the end of the village, and there in the dugout or cellar—her storehouse and residence combined—excavated beneath the cottage that was once her home, she replenishes her stock of pears, and sets off again to the spot where her soldier customers are.

Many times I have seen her thus selling her humble wares amid the dismal scene of ruin that she knew but lately and for long years as a cheerful, pleasant village, a harbour of friends and familiar faces. And always thus has she seemed to me the very epitome of all sadness and solitariness and desolation.

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I am in luck, for Clémence is my friend.

If you could see this charming refugee from La Bassée you would understand. For Clémence has an air.

Tall—just elegantly tall for a woman—and deliciously rounded in form, Clémence is good to look upon; refreshing. Her features are

patrician in their regularity, her brown eyes are a-sparkle with the light of youth, the cunning waviness of her dark hair is a tantalising delight, and when she smiles her teeth gleam like snow in a setting of red roses. When Clémence laughs you are reminded of the song of little rivers or of the dulcet tones of a harp or of anything else that is soft and restrained and sweetly musical. And she has to laugh very often when I speak to her—not at my wit, truly, but at my execrable French. But it is well worth while making blunders just to hear Clémence laugh and to hear her, in her pretty French, correct one's errors.

When she does not call me "Tum" she calls me "M'sieu le Curé," because she thinks no one could read or write so much in his leisure time except a Curé, and indeed at an early stage of our friendship she asked me if I was going to be a "Curé Ecossais." And when I laughed at that she began to laugh too, so I continued laughing softly that I might have the pleasure of hearing *her* laugh.

A laughing friend is a good thing to have at all times, especially if she be two-and-twenty, pretty, and laughs sweetly; but Clémence is more than that. She volunteered once to wash and mend my underclothes, and when I hesitated

to comply with her request—for a washing tub does not seem a fitting background for a young goddess—she insisted. And when Clémence insists——

Well, anyhow, she is now my self-constituted laundress when the battalion is stationed in the town of Beuvry. I find myself almost tempted to make holes purposely in my socks, for Clémence darns so nicely; but I don't, for that were to take advantage of her good nature.

The first time that Clémence thus played the role of laundress to me I offered to pay her for her labour, and it was only when I saw her pretty air of indignation and offence that I realised what a *faux pas* I had made, and apologised as best I could. She was my friend, so she told me, and one does not pay one's friend for favours done: the gladness of the doing is recompense enough. And, besides, her two brothers were at the war, and her fiancé also, and when she performed a little service for a Scottish soldier, she felt somehow that she was helping them too; and she hoped that they did not lack friends who would add in little ways to their comfort.

But the mere washing and mending of my linen does not constitute the sum of Clémence's kindness to me. In the mornings she has hot

water ready for me for shaving purposes, and in the evenings—ah! in the evenings I go to sit in the little kitchen at the back of the house. Clémence's grandfather and grandmother sit in great chairs, one on each side of the stove; Clémence sits at one side of the table—knitting, knitting, always knitting for those dear ones of hers who are at the war, and laughing and talking in bright fashion to me who sits at the other end of the table eating with the utmost relish the delicious "salade" that she has made, and drinking numerous little bowlful of *café au lait*.

We talk on all manner of subjects—I very haltingly, she very vivaciously—and when I entreat her to speak more slowly she mimics me and appeals to her *grande-mère* to say if she is talking too fast. The old folks, a smile on their homely faces, sit listening to every word, obviously enjoying the irresponsible chatter. And sometimes when Clémence talks of Paris, which she has visited several times, *grand-père* will join in the conversation, for he has been there also, though many, many years ago. At some time or other during the evening too he is pretty certain to talk to me of Marie Stuart, of whose history he appears to know much more than I do.

When nine o'clock comes I repair to my "bedroom"—which is the *salon* or drawing-room of the house—while Clémence and her grandparents retire to the murky depths of the cellar. For Beuvry is distant but a few kilometres from the firing-line, and every other day the Germans send over a few shells into it—and every other day a few harmless civilians, or it may be some soldiers billeted in the town, are killed or wounded. And so the inhabitants have perforce, for safety's sake, to hide in their cellars at night, and thither they hurry also during the day when a bombardment begins. As for me "dossin' it out in the drorin'-room"—why, that happens to be the Orderly Room of our battalion, and my duty compels me to be there by night as well as by day, so I snuggle up in my blanket in a corner of the bare room and try to look as pleasant as possible when some incoming messenger awakens me from my slumber—which, unfortunately, happens very frequently during the night.

I have written of Clémence because I want you to know that the young women of France are *not* all represented in the types of French femininity that you find portrayed in comedies on the stage. They have qualities as fine as have their British sisters, and their attractive-

ness is as great. *Ca va sans dire!* The war is terrible to them in its reality; yet, despite their suffering and suspense—suspense for the safety of loved ones in the firing-line—they can still smile and laugh, with the laughter of perfect faith in the end. They are going to win—they know it, for they have made up their minds to win, and so the heart must fain be merry at times. But always, always there is a solemn undercurrent even in their laughter.

If you heard Clémence speak of her mother you would understand many things; for instance, you would perhaps appreciate a little the depth of veneration—or should it rather be the height of worship?—in which “*ma mère*” is held in France. Clémence’s mother is—no one exactly knows where: but somewhere on the other side of the firing-line—in the territory now in German hands. And since that date, many months ago, when the German hordes overswept this fair land, Clémence has heard from her mother but once, and that was in the Spring of 1915.

Perhaps you can understand her anxiety; perhaps you can appreciate the moistness that dims her eyes when she speaks of “*Maman.*”

Yet Clémence is my laughing friend, as good, moreover, as she is pretty and bright.

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The last of my "three women" is Renée—the elf of the sunlit hair and with the blue of heaven in her big wondering eyes.

I am staying in the home of Renée as I write—the front kitchen is for the time being our Orderly Room. And not half-an-hour ago she came to me and held up her two Cupid's lips to receive a good-night kiss, and said, "*Au revoir : à demain !*" so quaintly and prettily that I could have kissed her again; but she was gone, blowing kisses to me as she went.

For Renée is two years and two months old, and is one of the sweetest little bundles of humanity that one could hope to meet. Within an hour of my entering her house she asked me if I was her papa, and when I answered (somewhat regretfully) in the negative, she confided to me very gravely that her papa was a soldier at the war; and was I a soldier too?

Renée is a true daughter of France, fearless of heart and the daintiest and most charming of coquettes.

Shall I tell you something? . . . She has made a conquest—and of whom? None other than he before whose eye a whole battalion quails, whose voice strikes awe to the stoutest hearts and lends speed to the most tired legs—none other than the regimental Sergeant-

Major. For in her presence all his stern military manner drops from him, and he becomes an extraordinarily human being with a liking for kiddies and a *penchant* for playing with them. If you saw him bouncing her in the air, she screaming with delight and crying "Encore, encore!" every time he desisted, you would doubt the evidence of your eyes, and conclude that this must be a twin brother of the S.-M., with none of the latter's on-parade sternness in his composition, but with a certain light-hearted irresponsibility in its place.

When he is busy over his papers Renée will enter the Orderly Room and climb upon his knee, will pull his moustache, and finger and examine intently the brass buttons on his tunic and the ribbon decorations on his breast, chattering volubly the while in baby French which we don't understand, though we know well enough what is in her little heart. Or she will force on the S.-M.'s attention a particularly battered old rag doll, which has one arm missing, and insist that it go to sleep on the table among his papers. And the S.-M. prepares a bed for it and covers it with blankets of pink blotting paper, and croons a lullaby over it—all to the ecstatic delight of Renée. Then her mother, a quiet-mannered, pleasant young woman, will beguile her to another

room, and warn her not to disturb the soldiers in their multitudinous *affaires*. But in a little while Renée is back again, blythe and affable and prattling as ever.

I wonder if, in after years, Renée will remember that strange phase of her childhood when her home was partly given over to foreign soldiers, when men in outlandish uniforms and speaking an unknown tongue were her daily companions, when she played and made holiday with them while Daddy was at the war.

Probably not, for Renée is but a baby; but the French children of a few years' older growth will in the time to come have strange recollections of their childhood.