

# AS IN THE DAYS OF MILLET

ONLY a few of the heroines of France are recorded in history; most of them are scattered over the fields in their thousands—wives of the peasant farmers. It is they who will suffer more acutely, even, than their men-folk the humiliation of the German invasion. One must live with or among them, as we did during the last war, to realise their supreme love for the soil of France; it has inspired almost every French writer of eminence in the history of that country.

In our quick and frequently distorted generalisations, we often repeat the fable that the French peasant is mean. He is economical through force of circumstances, but not mean; and then Madame is always a force at his elbow in preventing waste; for "gaspillage," to her, is one of the deadliest sins. Perhaps that is why we saw farm implements and carts, repaired until little of the original remained, which had been in the family for generations. Nothing is wasted on a French farm.

## Intense Cultivation

But then farming in France is not as we know it. Their farms are small and intensely cultivated; more often than not they consist of only a few precious acres. And there you will find no weed-infested corners, no riotous tangles of gorse and broom, for each farm resembles a garden—trim and incredibly tidy. Hedges always look as though they were fresh from the barber's chair. Millet's pictures of "The Gleaners" and other scenes of peasant life are as true to-day as when he painted them—the radio and other doubtful blessings of "progress" have made little difference. During harvest time the women and children still gather, by hand and rake, the loose heads of corn which have fallen from carts or escaped the blade of the reaper.

## An Average Day

If our farmers' wives feel inclined to cry to high heaven that their lot is dire, let them compare their day with that of a French peasant woman, wife of one of those small farmers in whose sheds and barns we found refuge when we rested from the trenches. One does not easily forget the kindness of those humble folk who had so little to spare. They were always out and about early, summer or winter. They roused us from our beds in the straw as they clattered over the cobbled yard in their heavy boots. And they were still working when we went to bed. Charles Vezin, a French writer of peasant life, sets out the average day of one such woman and her duties:

- 4.45 a.m.: Gets up, lights the stove and makes the morning coffee.
- 5 a.m.: Milks the cows and sees to other farm animals.
- 6.30 a.m.: Separates the milk, does the churning, and feeds the young calves.
- 7 a.m.: Gets the children out of bed and prepares them for school.
- 7.45 a.m.: Prepares breakfast for the family and any farm hands.
- 8 a.m.: Sits down to a hurried breakfast.

## Life Is Hard For Women On French Farms

(By O. A. GILLESPIE)



MILLET'S "THE GLEANERS": "As true to-day as when he painted it." The illustration above is from a British Museum etching, after the original painting

- 8.30 a.m.: Attends to feeding the pigs and fowls.
- 9.30 a.m.: Cleans the dairy and washes the milking utensils.
- 10.30 a.m.: Prepares the dinner and cleans the house.
- Mid-day: Serves the dinner.
- 1 p.m.: Feeds the cattle, milks the cows which have just calved, and feeds their milk to the calves.
- 2 p.m.: Does any washing, ironing or mending and prepares more food for the animals.
- 3.45 p.m.: Feeds the young pigs.
- 4.30 p.m.: Has a cup of coffee.
- 5.30 p.m.: Attends to the breeding pigs.
- 6 p.m.: Feeds the cattle and helps with the milking.
- 7 p.m.: Does the separating and feeds the calves again.
- 7.30 p.m.: Prepares and serves the supper.
- 8 to 9 p.m.: Washes and cleans the household utensils, as well as those of the dairy.

Thus her stern, relentless life goes on, the round of the seasons. Full of hope and of uncertainty, too, she works side by side with her husband from the time of the spring sowing until the harvest is ripe. All their life is a vigil.

## Reserves for Rainy Days

André Maurois sharpens our realisation of the French peasant woman's sense of economy:

"She loves to know that she possesses, sometimes tucked away in a money box, sometimes in an ancient carved cupboard, even under a pile of old linen, those reserves which insure, in case of sickness or adversity, that she will not have to depend on charity. If a Frenchman likes to fill his 'stocking,' sometimes with astonishing rapidity, it is because he is always conscious that a war or a crisis may empty it with equally astonishing ease. But

he never talks to the neighbours about his savings."

The £200,000,000 in gold which France was forced to pay to Germany at the end of the war of 1870 came mostly from those same "stockings." There has been reason for economy in France; there is tragic reason for it once again.

## Nothing Comes Easily

In that full and urgent list of tasks detailed above is another reason for French peasant economy. Nothing comes easily to them; for centuries that same soil has been tilled by the same families, hence the necessity for returning to it natural refuse. From that need was born the "midden," into which goes sweepings and drainage from the farm buildings, of which it is the centre. Then, twice a year, the "midden" is emptied of its rank contents to the last drop of liquid, and spread over the farm. Animals receive constant attention. Cattle are kept under cover all winter, in most of France, and fed even during the summer months. During the birth of the calves in spring the farmer and his wife, lighted by a lantern, spend many nights in the byres until the event is over. Pigs receive the same care; rabbits are kept in runs and hutches for their flesh and their skins.

## Community Spirit

The independent spirit of the French peasants is curiously interwoven with that sense of community which spells charity. If a neighbour falls ill during the spring sowing, his neighbours attend to the planting; if a chill lays him low during the hay carting, his neighbours

see that his hay is gathered; if a farmhouse is burned and the animals and harvest destroyed the neighbours club together to help—one gives a bushel of grain, another some hay; the more wealthy contribute a cow; others give some silver. In times of sickness the women take turns to watch through the night beside the bed of the patient. That solidity extends through the whole community, for a family sentiment seems to bind more closely those engaged in similar occupations. Perhaps this is because each group has its patron saint—St. Catherine for the wheelwrights; St. Paul for the carpenters; St. Honoré for the bakers; St. Barbe for the firemen, and so on.

Slow in speech and movement, the stubborn courage of these people, born of the plough and the gleaming furrow, has contributed to the destiny of a race which has endured great and terrible adversity, from which it has risen, as it must rise again.

## PRIZES FOR ORIGINAL COMPOSITIONS

DOUBLE honours have been gained by Douglas Gordon Lilburn, of Hunterville, in the competition for the best original compositions, held recently as part of the National Centennial Music Festival celebrations. The results were announced the other day. There were two classes in the competition—one for an orchestral work, which, to be eligible, had to be either an overture in sonata form, or a tone poem taking approximately ten to fifteen minutes to perform, and the other for a choral work. First and second prizes in both classes were £70 and £30, and both of these having been gained by Douglas Lilburn in the orchestral class, an additional prize of £30 was awarded to the next in order, Robert Adam Horne. Lilburn also gained the first prize in the choral class.

The two orchestral works submitted by Douglas Lilburn, who is now studying in England, were "Drysdale" Overture and "Festival" Overture. His prize-winning choral work was "Prodigal Country." Mr. Horne, who comes from Fendalton, Christchurch, submitted a tone-poem, "Ao-Tea-Roa."

Winner of second prize in the choral class was Clement Roy Spackman, of Dunedin, who used a Maori legend as theme for his composition, "The Burning of the House of Hades."

The competition was open only to people born in New Zealand or resident in this country since childhood; born in the Dominion and having lived here until 16 years old but who are now abroad; born outside the country but having resided here for 20 years; born outside New Zealand, but having arrived here before 10 years old, and having lived here until 20 years old.