

The French Woman and Her Bread

(MACDONALD HALL)

THE French people of the humbler classes have always depended very considerably upon bread as a staple food. Breakfast cereals and porridge are practically unknown to them. Potatoes merely take their turn with other vegetables, and are not an indispensable adjunct to a dinner. The first meal of the day consists of a bowl of coffee or milk with bread. Dinner may be of boiled meat or a "ragout" of beef or mutton with vegetables preceded by soup, or it may be soup only, but always a large quantity of bread is eaten. The hungry child who asks for a "gouter" in the afternoon, is given a thick slice of bread and an apple, or a little jam. Butter is seldom spread upon the bread; it is put into the soup, or the stew, or the omelette, or eggs "sur le plat," and used to baste the roast fowl on Sunday.

Peep into the farmhouse kitchen with its floor of red bricks and watch the good woman in her white cap and blue-checked apron as she prepares to serve the family dinner. A fire of wood burns on a flat-raised hearth, and covered earthen pots are embedded in the hot ashes at the front of it. Here the soup is simmering, and perhaps a dish of eggs is cooking, or a savoury cabbage which will be dressed with sour cream and eaten with much bread. As she opens the door of the carved oak "armoire," you can see the week's supply of large, round, flat loaves piled on a shelf.

At least this is what you could have seen before the war, in the happy, prosperous days when the men were working on the little farms, and there was always enough to eat, and the children were plump and rosy.

But now?

The men have all gone to fight, and the women and children have to do all the farm-work, to plough and harrow and get in the hay, to reap and to bind. Boys of 15 are doing their father's work in the fields and orchards, while girls are looking after the stock and the dairy and the vegetable garden, and taking butter, eggs and poultry to town on market day. And the men are coming back wounded, crippled, stricken with tuberculosis, needing care, nursing and good food. Where is the food to come from? It is not surprising that production has decreased during these last terrible years; in some cases less than half the usual amount of the crop has been raised, and there has been a very serious reduction in live stock also.

Under these circumstances is it fair to ask the Frenchwoman to reconstruct the habits of a lifetime in regard to her housekeeping methods? Is she the one who should have to devise substitutes, to go out of her way to introduce new food combinations?

She asks for bread. She cannot have it unless Canada sends it. Bread without butter, bread a week old, dry bread, sour bread—she will not complain!

Think of it, you who reject the top slice on the pile because the surface is a little dry; who cannot eat crust; who must have your toast fresh and hot! You who find your meals ready prepared for you, three times a day, with no stint and no deficiency!

Are you not willing to **eat a little less** that the Frenchwoman and her family may have what they so sorely need?