

BOOK OF THE WEEK.

"A HILLTOP ON THE MARNE."*

This book, written in correspondence form, describes how an elderly American lady, three months before war broke out, who had come to feel "the need of calm and peace—perfect peace," settled herself at Huiry, thirty miles from Paris. It is in that district between Paris and Meaux, little known to the ordinary traveller. It only consists of less than a dozen rude farm houses, less than five miles as the bird flies from Meaux, which, with a fair cathedral and a beautiful chestnut-shaded promenade on the banks of the Marne, spanned just there by lines of old mills whose water-wheels churn the river into foaming eddies, has never been populated with excursionists. "My house was, when I leased it, little more than a peasant's hut. It is considerably over one hundred and fifty years old, with stables and out-buildings attached whimsically, and boasts six gables.

"All the rooms on the ground floor are paved in red tiles, and the staircase is built right into the salon. The ceilings are raftered. The cross beam in the salon fills my soul with joy—it is over a foot wide and a foot and a half thick. The walls and the rafters are painted green.

"But much as I like all this, it was not this that attracted me here. That was the situation. The house stands in a small garden separated from the road by an old gnarled hedge of hazel. It is almost on the crest of the hill on the south bank of the Marne. This is a rolling country of grain fields, orchards, masses of black-currant bushes, vegetable plots and asparagus beds. It is what the French call *un paysage riant*, and I assure you it does more than smile these lovely June mornings. I am up every morning as soon as the sun, and I slip my feet into *sabots*, wrap myself into a big cloak and run right on to the lawn to make sure the panorama has not disappeared in the night. There they always lie—too good almost to be true—miles and miles of laughing country, little white towns just smiling in the early light; a thin strip of river here and there, dimpling and dancing, stretches of fields of all colours—all so peaceful and so gay and so 'chummy' that it gladdens the opening day and makes me rejoice to have lived to see it."

To this charming retreat, the writer has told us that she retired in hope of "perfect peace."

A month later she writes: "Absolutely no news to write to you except that my hedge of dahlias is coming up like nothing else in the world but Jack's Beanstalk." But she adds that she cannot break herself of reading the newspapers, and reading them eagerly. "It is all the fault of that nasty affair in Bosnia; we are simply holding our breaths here."

In the next letter, she says: "The tension, here is terrible; there is an absolute suspension of work

* By Mildred Aldrich. London: Constable & Co., Ltd.

in the fields. It is as if all France was holding its breath. Yes! I have a family of friends at Voulangis, about two miles the other side of Crécy-en-Brie . . . so I hasten to relieve your mind just now, when there is a menace of war, and I am sitting tight on my hill-top on the road to the frontier."

"Aug. 3rd.—Well—war is declared . . . just after breakfast my friend from Voulangis drove over in a great state of excitement, with the proposition that I should pack up and return with her. She seemed alarmed at the idea of my being alone and seemed to think a group of us would be safer. It was a point of view that had not occurred to me, and I was not able to catch it. Still, I was touched by her thoughtfulness, even though I had to say that I proposed to stay right here. When she asked what I proposed to do if the army came retreating across my garden, I instinctively laughed. All the same, that other people were thinking it possible brought me up standing. I just looked at the little house I had arranged such a little time ago. I have only been here two months."

Very soon to this brave lady the possibility became a probability.

"September 3rd.—Oh, the things I have seen and felt since I last wrote to you over two weeks ago. Here I am again cut off from the world, and have been since the first of the month."

Describing the evacuation of the surrounding towns she says:—

"One of the most disquieting things about this was to see the effect of the procession as it passed along the road. All the way from Esbly to Montry people began to pack at once and the speed with which they fell into the procession was disconcerting.

"When we finally escaped from the crowd into the poplar-shaded avenue which leads to the Château de Condé I turned to look at Amélie for the first time. I had had time to get a good hold on myself.

" 'Well, Amélie,' I said.

" 'Oh, Madame,' she said, 'I shall stay.'

" 'And so shall I.' "

Amélie was her *femme de ménage*—"a sort of cross between a housekeeper and a maid-of-all-work."

"You can get some idea of how exhausted I was on that night of September 2nd when I tell you I waked the next morning to find I had a picket at my gate. I did not know until Amélie came to get my coffee ready next morning. She also brought me news that they were preparing to blow up the bridges on the Marne; that the post office had gone; that the English were cutting the telegraph wires.

"While I was taking my coffee quietly, as if it were an everyday occurrence, she said: 'Well, Madame, I imagine we are going to see the Germans.' "

An amusing episode was where she feeds the picket at her gate.

"I knew little about military discipline—less

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