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Louise Michel
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1886

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Memories of the Commune

Louise Michel

1886

I at first wrote this volume without telling anything about myself. When friends pointed this out I added a few personal episodes despite the ennui it caused me. As I did so the opposite effect was produced: as I advanced in the tale I came to love reliving this time of struggle for freedom, which was my true existence, and I love losing myself in the memory of this.

This is why I look upon my thoughts as a series of tableaux where pass thousands of existences that have disappeared forever.

There we are on the Champs de Mars: our arms are stacked and the night is beautiful. At about 3:00 a.m. we leave, thinking we are going to Versailles. I speak with old Louis Moreau, and he too is happy to be setting out. In place of my old rifle he gave me a Remington carbine. For the first time I have a good weapon though it's said not to be too reliable, which isn't true. I recount all the lies I told my mother so she wouldn't worry. All my precautions are taken, I have letters full of reassuring news in my pockets that will be post-dated. I tell her they needed me in an ambulance; that I'll be going to Montmartre on the first occasion.

Poor woman, how I loved her. How grateful I am to her for the freedom she allowed me to act as my conscience dictated, and how much I would have liked to spare her the bad days she so often had.

The comrades from Montmartre are there. We're sure of each other and sure of those who command.

Now we go quiet; the fight has begun. There is a hill and I shout as I run forward: To Versailles! To Versailles! Razoua tosses me his sword to rally the men. We shake hands at the top; the sky is on fire, and no one has been wounded.

We deploy as tirailleurs in the fields full of little tree stumps. You would think we had done this before.

There we are in Moulineaux. The gendarmes aren't holding out as was thought. We think we're going to advance further but no, we're going to spend the night, some of us in the fort, others in the Jesuit convent. Those of us who thought we were going to go further, those from Montmartre and myself, cry with rage. And yet we're confident. Neither Eudes nor Ranvier nor the others would remain in place without serious reason. They tell us the reasons but we don't listen. We regain hope: there are now cannons at the fort of Issy and it will be a good to remain there. We had left with strange munitions, the leftovers of the siege, the bullets not matching the guns' caliber.

I see passing before me like shades those who were in the great hall below the convent: Eudes, the May brothers, the Caria brothers, three old men who were as brave as heroes: old man Moreau, old man Chevalet, old man Caria, Razoua, all federals from Montmartre; a negro black as ebony with pointy white teeth like those of a wild beast: he's good, intelligent, and brave; and a former pontifical Zouave converted to the Commune.

The Jesuits have left, apart from an old man who says he's not afraid of the Commune and who remains peacefully in his room and the cook who, I don't know why, makes me think of Brother Jean des Eutomures. The paintings that decorate the walls aren't worth two sous, aside from a portrait that gives a good idea of the

subject's character: it must be some Jesuit director. There is also an adoration of the magi, one of whom resembles an ugly version of our black federal, along with paintings from saintly history and other foolishness.

The fort is magnificent, a spectral fortress, bitten into on high by the Prussians, for whom this breach went perfectly well. I spend a good deal of time with the artillerymen. We receive the visit there of Victorine Eudes, a long-time friend who is still young. She too fires well.

There are the women with their bullet-pierced red flag saluting the Federals. They set up mobile hospital in the fort, from which the wounded are sent to those in Paris that are better equipped. In order to be more useful we spread out. I go to the train station at Clamart, fired upon every night by the Versailles artillery. We follow a hedge lined path to the fort of Issy; the road is full of violets in blossom crushed by the cannon balls.

Right nearby is the stone mill. Often there aren't enough of us in the Clamart trenches. If the fort's cannon didn't support us a surprise attack would be possible: the Versaillais never knew how few of us there were.

It even happened that one night there were only two of us in the trench in front of the station, though I don't know why: the former pontifical Zouave and myself with loaded rifles: we could at least give warning. We had the unbelievable luck not to be attacked that night. As we went back and forth in the trench he said to me as we met:

"What impression do you have of the life we're leading?"

"The impression of seeing a river bank before us that we have to reach," I said.

"I have the impression of reading a picture book," he answered.

We continued to walk in the trench in the silence of the Versaillais over Clamart.

When Lisbonne came in the morning bringing a crowd with him he was both happy and furious, shaking his head under the bullets that again whistled around us as if he were chasing away flies.

There was a night skirmish in the cemetery in Clamart amidst the graves lit up by flashes that were then again only illuminated by the light of the moon that made visible, white as ghosts, the gravestones behind which burst the rapid lightning of rifles.

Another night expedition with Berceau in the same place, with those who had left us rejoining us under the fire of the Versaillais with a thousand times more danger.

I see all this again as if in a dream in the land of dreams, the dream of freedom.

A student who didn't share our ideas, but who was even less on the side of the Versaillais, came to Clamart to exchange fire with the aim of verifying his calculation of probabilities.

He had brought a volume of Baudelaire which we read a few pages of when we had the time.

One day when several Federals had been struck by cannonballs in the same place, a small platform in the middle of the trench, he wanted to recheck his calculations and invited me for a cup of coffee.

We comfortably settled ourselves and read the piece entitled "La Charogne." We had almost finished our coffee when the National Guard threw themselves on us and pulled us away, shouting, "Good God, this has to stop!"

At the same moment the cannonball fell, smashing the cups on the platform and reducing the book to impalpable pieces.

"My calculations were exactly right," the student said, brushing off the dirt that covered him.

He stayed a few more days, but I never saw him again.

During the Commune the only people I saw lacking in courage was a chubby chap who came to worry the young woman he'd just wed and who was as happy as could be to bring a note from me

One of the future revenges for the murder of Paris will be that of revealing the customary infamous betrayals of military reaction.

to Eudes asking the latter to send him back to Paris. I abused his confidence by writing more or less the following:

“My dear Eudes:

“Can you please send this imbecile back to Paris. All he is good for is to cause panic if there were people here capable of being panicked. I’ve convinced him that the cannon shots from our fort are actually from Versailles so that he’ll run away quicker. Please send him away.”

He was so afraid that we never saw him again.

If he kept his federal uniform when the Versailles army entered Paris he would have been immediately shot along with the defenders of the Commune. There were many others in this situation.

The other one of the same type was a young man. One night when there were a handful of us at the Clamart station and the Versailles artillery was firing on us he was seized with the obsession of surrendering and no form of reasoning could shake this idea. I said to him: “Do it if you’d like, but I’m staying here and I’ll blow up the station if you surrender it.” I sat down with a candle in a small chamber where the projectiles were piled up and spent the night there. Someone came to shake my hand and I saw that he was on the watch as well; it was the Negro. The station held out and the young man left the next day and never returned.

A strange adventure occurred in Clamart to Fernandez and me.

We had gone with several Federals to the game warden’s house, to which men of good will had been called.

So many bullets whistled around us that Fernandez said to me: “If I’m killed take care of my little sisters.” We embraced and continued along the road. Three or four wounded men were in the house, lying on the floor or on mattresses. The game warden was absent and his wife, left alone, seemed frightened.

When we started to remove the wounded men she started begging me and Fernandez to leave. Leaving the wounded behind who,

she said, couldn't be transported and should be left under the care of the two or three federals who accompanied us.

Not being able to understand why the woman was acting this way we wouldn't for anything in the world leave the others in this suspect place.

We removed the wounded with great difficulty on ambulance stretchers that we had brought while the woman crawled after us, begging the two of us to leave on our own.

Seeing that she was getting nowhere she went silent and watched us go away from her front door, carrying our patients upon whom bullets were raining, it being customary for Versailles to fire on ambulances.

We later learned that regular army soldiers hid in the cellar of the game warden. Did this woman fear seeing other woman murdered or was she simply delirious?

Along with our wounded we brought a half-dead little Versaillais soldier who, like the others, was taken to a mobile hospital in Paris where he began to heal. At the moment of the army's invasion of Paris he would have been killed murdered by the victors just like all the other wounded.

When Eudes went to the Legion of Honor I went to Montrouge with La Cecilia, and then to Neuilly with Dombrowski. These two men physically didn't resemble each other at all made the same impression during actions; the same rapid gaze, the same decisiveness, the same impassibility.

It was in the trenches of Hautes Bruyères that I came to know Paintendre, the commander of lost children. If this name of lost children was ever justified it was the case for him, for them. So great was their daring that it didn't seem they could ever be killed. And yet Paintendre was, and many of them as well.

In general, it's possible to see people as brave as the Federal, but braver never. It was their enthusiasm that could have vanquished with the rapidity of a revolutionary movement.

The slanders about the army of the Commune spread around the provinces; it was made up of bandits and fugitives from justice said Foutriquet.

And yet Paule Mink, Amouroux and other valiant revolutionaries had moved the major cities where Communes were declared who sent their adherence to Paris. The rest of the provinces and the countryside received military reports from Versailles. For example, that on the death of Duval frightened the villages.

“our troops,” the report said, “took more than 500 prisoners and in them we can see the faces of the wretches who, to sate their beastly passions, with a light heart had nearly destroyed the country. Low demagoguery had never before offered the saddened gaze of honest men more ignoble faces. Most were between 40 – 50 years old, but there were also old men and children in these long lines of hideous individual. Some women could also be seen among them. The cavalry platoon that escorted them had great difficulty in tearing them from the grips of the enraged crowd. Nevertheless, we managed to lead them safe and sound to the great stables.

“As for the individual Duval, that other fake general, he was executed in the morning along with two officers of the Commune's general staff.

“All three met the fate reserved to all insurgent leaders taken in arms as braggarts.”

(The war of the Communists of Paris by a superior officer of the Versailles Army)

We knew what to expect from the generals of the empire who passed over to the service of the republic in Versailles without themselves or the Assembly changing anything but their title.