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The Women of the Commune

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We have all been so drilled from our youth up in the prejudices of property and authority that even the workers, for whom property and authority have done so little, are not free from superstitious belief in their necessity. Especially we are all too much inclined to believe that mere confusion must follow on a popular revolt, unless some central or local authority be immediately set up to control social life and reorganize the people.

During the Commune of 1871, the newly-elected Municipal Government was too deeply engaged by the enemy at the gates to make many attempts at social reconstruction. Was the city, in which so much of the old order had been overthrown, given up to disorder or to merely aimless individual effort? Did its social life run down, like a watch with a broken spring?

Historians-*friend and foe*-have been almost wholly occupied with the official doings of the Communal Council, and have left unchronicled the spontaneous action of the people. And yet that authoritative Communal Organization was a mere compromise between the ideas of the past and the new spirit of social revolution stirring in the masses and it is to the free ini-

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tiative of the people themselves that we must look for the indications of the real meaning and scope of the insurrection.

Little as we know of the social life of the workers during those few brief weeks of partial freedom from property rule, that little is of a kind to raise high our hopes for the future.

Take, for instance, the conduct of that part of the people who are generally supposed to have least spontaneous initiative, to be most completely creatures of habit and routine, least strong and courageous, least fit to act for themselves-the women.

When the treachery or faint-heartedness of the men entrusted with authority by the people allowed the cannon over which the federated battalions of the National Guard were keeping watch in the name of the city, to be surprised by the troops of the middle-class Government, and the Central Committee knew nothing of the treachery or the danger, the working women of Montmartre waited for no centralized Organization, no word of command, but marched up the open streets against the leveled muskets of the soldiers, and by their heroic daring won over the wavering hirelings of Thiers to be the allies of the people. Those women seized the critical moment for action, and acted boldly; and Paris was won for the Commune.

But the working women showed not merely courage and cool promptitude in the face of danger, but, when the fighting was over, bestowed equal energy upon such reorganization of social life as the terrible conditions of the siege rendered possible. An active official of the Commune writes as follows :

”The Commune being obliged to fight against Versailles from the very beginning, there was scarcely any room left to women for an official part to take in the movement. However, in my arrondissement, and, I am sure, in several others, some rudimentary steps were taken. For instance, I took possession of the different schools conducted by nuns, and replaced them by lay female teachers. I did the same with the salles d’asile, that is, the buildings where very little children, too young to

go to school, are kept. All ambulances were likewise kept by women. So were the cantines, or eating houses, which had been founded during the first siege.

But in an unofficial capacity their conduct was truly beyond praise. So far as my district is concerned, they had formed committees to inquire into the wants of every family, especially of girls; to organize labor for women as far as the stormy events through which we had to pass would allow, cutting and making flannel shirts for the men who had to fight extra muros; attending at houses where wounded men or patients lay, etc. At night they crowded public meetings, took part in the proceedings, encouraged men to resist, proposed motions interesting their sex, which were afterwards transmitted to the Commune, etc.

” Lastly, during the hot days, when the fight was raging in the streets, they were seen everywhere, assisting in erecting barricades, bringing refreshments and food to the combatants, nursing the wounded, shrouding the dead after washing them, risking their life every minute to protect and screen the escape of;the defeated men after the taking of a barricade, bearing with the most stoic courage affronts, ill-treatment, and even death, to which they were subjected by infuriated, stupid soldiers. If so many of us could escape immediate death, and even manage to escape to a foreign land, nine out of every ten at least have to be thankful to one or more women. That influence of women, as well as their energy, was so well felt by Versailles that they charged them with every kind of atrocious crime, which, however, all their courts-martial could never succeed in bringing home. The greatest of all, Louise Michel, is for me just an enlarged personification of what an immense number of women have been at that time.

Lefrancais tells in his memoirs how, on that terrible morning when the bloodhounds of Versailles had Paris by the throat and the scattered remnants of the National Guard retreated within the city, they found barricades ready erected in the most defen-

sible streets by the women of the various quarters. And he mentions that on that morning of despair the first organized contingent of defenders whom he met was a troop of women, fully armed, marching down to garrison one of these barricades.

If such was the energy, the capacity for action and for free self organization in new and terrible social conditions, shown by the working women of Paris during a few short weeks of comparative freedom, seventeen years ago, what may we not expect from the spontaneous initiative of the mass of worksmen and women both when at length they take courage to rise in their strength and destroy for ever the tyranny of property and authority throughout the civilized world?