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Midinettes on strike

May Picqueray

The small hands, the midinettes, these small bees of the great fashion houses, from where the masterpieces worn by artists and ladies of the Paris and international bourgeoisie come, these young girls who you can meet in squares or at the Tuileries, at lunchtime, sharing their meagre meals with the birds, their friends, are very badly paid, live on very little, dress with almost nothing, but always with taste. The midinettes are known in all of Paris for their laughter, their chicness, and their small artists' hands.

But there's a down-side to this. Today, they are on strike. They can no longer manage. Bosses who exploit them shamelessly don't want to hear anything about granting them a pay increase. So, they take to the streets.

There is a meeting this afternoon at the trade union hall, near République. Our friends Margot, Marie, Mado Ferré are on strike. Thérèse and I decide, in solidarity, to join them, to bring them our support. The room is packed. Girls and women follow one another on the platform, they explain the situation in couture: whether it is in workshops or in rooms, they are exploited all the same. They will not give up, a delegation is chosen to start negotiations with the bosses' union.

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When they leave, it is like sparrows taking flight. They laugh, hail one another. Surprise: we can see several hundred guys from the building industry and road workers who have stopped work to bring their moral and material support to the midinettes. That's great! They are cheered and even kissed. It is decided to go demonstrate in front of the great fashion houses, and then on the Champs Elysées. He guys give their arms to the girls, and the picturesque and joyous march is ready to flow onto the Grands Boulevards. Suddenly, a squadron of republican guards shows up on the République square, surrounding open carriages. Poincaré¹ sits in the front carriage. The rest of the government in the other ones.

“It is Poincaré, you know, ‘the man who laughs in cemeteries’...”

He is simply here to inaugurate a very strange exhibition on the République square. In some sheds, machines have been set up in which we could see photographic sights of life in the tranches, the transport of the wounded, the dead lying on the battlefields, and all the horrors of war. And, on top of this, the Paris public had to pay to see that...

We are at the edge of the pavement, ready to join the march, Poincaré gets off, waving at the crowd who came to salute him. All of a sudden, Mado leaves us, walks towards him, raises her hand and shouts at his face: “Bastard! You came to see your dead!” Immediately she is seized by the guard and handed to the police who rushed to the scene (and so are we as we didn't want to leave her); there we are embarked for the police station, mistreated and pushed into a corner like thieves, then interrogated by the commissar who gives us such an earful!...

We are thrown into cells and kept overnight. We weren't proud! What was to become of us? Fortunately this “attentat” was not taken seriously. There was probably an order not to talk about it to the press, in other words to stifle the case.

We got off lightly, but we were furious we had missed the march on the Champs Elysées.