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The Commune is Risen

Voltairine de Cleyre

March 1912

“They say ‘She is dead; the Commune is dead’;
That ‘If she were living her earthquake tread
Would scatter the honeyless hornets’ hive.’
I am not dead, nor yet asleep;
Nor tardy, though my steps seem slow;
Nor feeble from the centuries’ sweep;
Nor cold, though chill the north winds blow.
My legions muster in all lands,
From field, from factory, from mine,
The workers of the world join hands
Across the centuries and brine.”

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NEVER since those lines were sung by the great unknown poet, whose heart shone red through his words, has the pulse of the world beat so true a response as it is beating now. We do not stand to-day as mourners at the bier of a Dead Cause, but with the joy of those who behold it living in the Resurrection.

What was it the Commune proclaimed? With what hope did it greet the world? And why did it fall?

The Commune proclaimed the autonomy of Paris. It broke the chain that fettered her to the heels of her step-mother, the State,— that State which had left her at the mercy of the Prussian besiegers, refusing to relieve her or allow her to relieve herself; that State which with a debt saddled upon the unborn bought off the Prussians, that it might revenge itself upon Paris, the beautiful rebel, and keep the means of her exploitation in its own hands.

The Commune was a splendid effort to break the tyranny of the centralized domination with which modern societies are cursed; a revolt at artificial ties, which express no genuine social union, the outgrowth of constructive social work, but only the union of oppression,— the union of those who seek to perfect an engine of tyranny to guarantee their possessions.

“Paris is a social unit,” said the communards; “Paris is, within itself, an organic whole. Paris needs no outside shell of coercion to hold it together. But Paris owes no subservient allegiance to that traitorous tool at Versailles, which calls itself the government of France; nothing to those who have left us unaided to be mowed by the Prussian guns. And Paris repudiates Versailles. We shall fight, we shall work, we shall live for ourselves.”

This was the word of the Commune, spoken to the world in the wild morning of the year 1871.

And the hope it built upon was this: When France beholds Paris fighting, the dream of '48 will rise again; and all her communes will proclaim their freedom, even as we. And then we are bound to win, for the Versailles government cannot conquer a revolt which breaks out everywhere. And France once kindled, the peoples of other nations will likewise rise; and this monster, “the State,” which is everywhere devouring liberty, will be annihilated.

This was the hope that lit the eyes of the Commune with dreaming fire, that March day, forty-one years ago.

The hope was doomed to disappointment; within three months the glorious rebel fell. She had called, but the response did not come. Why? Because she had not asked enough. Because making

the barren burial sands of Caledonia, the Great Ghost has risen, crying across the world, *Vive la Commune!*

he knows the use of the soil. And no man can make peace with him, unless that use is guaranteed to him. He has suffered so long and so terribly under the hell of land- ownership, that he has determined on death in revolt rather than resubmission to its slavery.

Stronger and stronger blows the hurricane, and those who listen to the singing in the wind know that Senator Lodge was right when he said: "I am against intervention, but it's like having a fire next door."

That fire is burning away the paper of artificial land-holding. That fire is destroying the delusion that any human creature on the face of the earth has the right to keep any other from going straight to the sources of life, and using them. That fire is shooting a white illumination upon the labor struggle, which will make the futile wage war conducted in the United States look like baby's play.

Yes, honorable Senators and Congressmen, the house next door is on fire—the house of Tyranny, the house of Shame, the house that is built by Robbery and Extortion, out of the sold bodies of a hapless race—its murdered men, its outraged women, its orphaned babies.

Yes, it is on fire. And let it burn,—burn to the ground—utterly. And do not seek to quench it by pouring out the blood of the people of the United States, in a vile defense of those financial adventurers who wear the name American. They undertook to play the game; let them play it to a finish; let them stand man to man against the people they have robbed, tortured, exiled.

Let it crumble to the ground, that House of Infamy; and if the burning gleeds fly hitherward, and the rotten structure of our own life starts to blaze, welcome, thrice welcome, purifying fire, that shall set us, too, upon the earth once more,—free men upon free land,—no tenant-dwellers on a landlord's domain.

In the roar of that fire we hear the Commune's "earthquake tread," and know that out of the graves at Pere-la-chaise, out of the trenches of Satory, out of the fever-plains of Guiana, out of

war upon the State, she had not made war upon that which creates the State, that to preserve which the State exists.

With the scrupulous, pitiful Conscience which Authority has cunningly bred in men, the Commune had respected property; had kept its enemy's books, and duly handed over the balances; had starved itself to feed its foes; had left common resources in private hands. And when McMahan's troops rode sabering through the streets of Paris, when Gallifet the butcher was dashing out children's brains with his own devil's hands upon her conquered pavements, the very horses they rode, the very sabers that cut, had been paid for by the murdered.

Every day, throughout the life of the Commune, the Bank of France had been allowed to transmit the sinews of war to Versailles, the social blood been drained to supply the social foe.

What appeal could so suicidal a course make to downright human nature, which, even in its utmost ignorance and simplicity, would say at once: "Feed the enemy! And starve myself! For what then shall I fight?"

In short, though there were other reasons why the Commune fell, the chief one was that in the hour of necessity, the Communards were not Communists. They attempted to break political chains without breaking economic ones; and it cannot be done.

Moreover the Paris Commune was faced by a problem which will forever face revolting cities with a terrible question mark,—the problem of food supply. Only the revoltee in control of the food-sources themselves can maintain his revolt indefinitely. Never till the rebels of industrial fields have joined their forces with agrarian labor,—or seized the land and themselves made it yield—can industrial or political revolt be anything more than futile struggling for a temporary gain which will alter nothing.

And this is the splendid thing which we have lived to see,—the rebellion of the landworker against the feudalism of Lord Syndicate; the revoltee maintaining himself upon that which he has wrested from the enemy; the red banner of the Commune floating no longer

on the wall of a besieged city, but in the open field of expropriated plantations, or over the rock-ribbed, volcano- built forts, whereto the free-riding guerilla fighter retreats after his dash against the lords of the soil.

I cannot speak for others. I cannot say how my comrades have felt during the long stagnant years, when spring after spring we have come together to repeat dead men's names and deeds, and weep over those whose bones lie scattered from Cayenne to New Caledonia. I know that for myself I often felt I was doing a weary and a useless thing, wearing out a habit, so to speak,—trying to warm my cold hands at a painted fire. For all these years since we of this generation have lived in America, there has been no stirring movement of the people of this continent to do a deed worth doing.

We have listened with curious fascination to our elders' stories of the abolition movement; we have welcomed the Russian revolutionists, and enviously listened to their accounts of deeds done or undone. We have watched the sharp crossing of weapons here and there in the ominous massing of Capital and Labor against each other all around us; but we have known perfectly well that there was little place for us in that combat, till it shall assume other lines than those which dominate it now, till it shall proclaim other purposes and other means.

All in vain it was for us to try to waken any profound enthusiasm in ourselves over the struggle of some limited body of workers, asking for a petty per cent. of wage. We understand too well that such a fight determines nothing, is like the continuous slipping backward of the feet in an attempt to climb a hill of gliding sand.

But now has come this glorious year of 1911-12, this year of world-wide revolt. Out of the enigmatic East a great storm sweeps; and though but little of its real breadth and height is visible or comprehensible to us, we understand so much: the immemorial silence has been broken, the crouching figure has up-straightened. The sources of our information are such that we cannot tell whether the economic regeneration of enslaved China

has actually begun, or the revolt is political merely as our reports make it appear. Whichever it may be, one thing is certain: China is no longer motionless; she is touched with the breath of life; she struggles.

Across the sea, in the island of our stolid forbears, a portentous sound has risen from the depths; in the roots of human life, in coal-caverns, Revolt speaks. And England faces Famine; faces the Property-system, faces a mighty army of voluntarily idle men; beholds the upper and the nether stone of economic folly, and feels the crunching of those merciless wheels, and underground the earthquake rumbles wide,—France, Germany, Austria—the mines growl.

And yet this mighty massing, inspiring and threatening as it is, is for a petty demand—a minimum wage! Such situations produce enlightenment; at any moment the demand may change to “The Mines for the Miners”; but as yet it has not come.

Only here in our America, on this continent cursed with land-grabbing syndicates, into whose unspoiled fatness every devouring shark has set his triple row of teeth,—this land whose mercenary spirit is the butt of Europe—only here, under the burning Mexican sun, we know men are revolting for something; for the great, common, fundamental economic right, before which all others fade,—the right of man to the earth. Not in concentrated camps and solid phalanxes; not at the breath of some leader's word; but over all the land, from the border to Yucatan, animated by spontaneous desire and resolution, in mutually gathered bands, as freemen fight, not uniformed slaves. And leaders come, and leaders go; they use the revolution and the revolution uses them; but whether they come or go, the land battle goes on.

In that quickening soil, the sower's response is ready; and the peasant uproots his master's sugar cane and tobacco, replanting corn and beans instead, that himself and the fighting bands may have sustenance. He does not make the mistake that Paris made; he sends no munitions to the enemy; he is an unlettered man, but