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## Glossary of Translated Titles

- Union des Poètes* — Union of Poets  
*Alliance des lettres* — Literary Alliance  
*Ministère de l'Instruction publique* — Ministry of Public Instruction  
*Société pour l'Instruction élémentaire* — Society for Elementary Education  
*Droit des Femmes* — Women's Rights  
*La Société/Démocratique de moralisation* — Democratic Society for Moralization  
*La Libre Pensée* — Free Thought group  
*Comité de moralisation par le travail* — Committee of Moralization through Work  
*Société de secours pour les victimes de la guerre* — Aid Society for the Victims of War  
*Société des femmes pour les victimes de la guerre* — Women's Society for the Victims of War  
*Fédération des artistes de Paris* — Federation of Paris artists  
*Éducation nouvelle* — New Education  
*Société des amis de l'enseignement* — Society of Friends of Education  
*Commission du travail* — Labour Commission  
*Société des libres penseurs* — the Society of Free-Thinkers  
*Légion Garibaldienne* — the Garibaldi Legion  
*Union des femmes pour la défense de Paris et les soins aux blessés* — Union of Women for the Defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded  
*Société de géographie* — the Geographic Society  
*Société d'acclimation* — the Acclimatization Society  
*Congrès régional ouvrier* — the Regional Workers' Congress  
*Cercle d'études sociales* — Social Study Circle  
*Union des femmes socialistes* — Union of Women Socialists  
*Société de solidarité des proscrits* — Solidarity Society of the Proscribed  
*La ligue des femmes* — the League of Women  
*Commission de répartition de secours aux familles des détenus politiques* — Commission for the Distribution of Relief to the Families of Political Prisoners  
*Académie française* — French Academy  
*Parti Ouvrier* — Workers Party

BLACK ROSE BOOKS

dedicates this book

to the memory of

**Christine Levesque,**

who, during her short life, carried the anarchist  
tradition nobly

## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Translators always face the question of whether to translate titles (particularly of organizations and of social and institutional ranks) or to leave them in the original language. As anyone who has read many translations will know, there is no standard, single way of solving the problem. Indeed, one could quote precedent for almost any combination of translation and non-translation that one chose to offer.

I have based my own choice on one simple assumption: most people who read a translation do so because they do not speak the language of the original publication. For these readers, constant use of untranslated titles is a barrier to comprehension rather than a welcome note of authenticity. I have, therefore, opted for maximum translation — undoubtedly more than purists will enjoy or those familiar with French will need but, I hope, useful for everyone else. (Even the untranslated word “rue” has been capitalized so as to make it conform visually to the normal style of the English sentences in which it is now being used.) The exceptions to my general rule of full translation are newspaper titles, book titles and poetry. Any untranslated reference needed for comprehension of the book is explained in a translator's footnote.

Most of the translator's footnotes, however, are there to expand upon a reference rather than to translate it. My goal, once again, is accessibility. I have written these footnotes for the reader who does not have detailed knowledge of French history, politics, culture and nineteenth-century legal institutions. I hope that those readers who are well-versed in these matters will forgive the necessarily cursory nature of my explanations and feel, as I do, that the advantages of offering them outweigh the risks of doing so with such brevity.

*P. W.*



*"Officers, do not strike her. Be respectful. Judges, be silent. This old madwoman is worth more than you who call her 'the Michel woman'. If you persist, you shall convince me that she is a saint. Why? In her, the flame burns."*

Barrès, *Notebooks*, VI, 91

## INTRODUCTION

Hagiography is always unsatisfactory, whether in honour of Saint Teresa of Lisieux or of Louise Michel. Saints (of whatever religion) and revolutionaries possess strikingly similar virtues and defects. The problem is that unquestioning faith, especially when linked with the noble goal of moral and spiritual instruction, tends to exclude critical judgment. As a result, saints are usually portrayed as absolute simpletons, whereas in fact they have often been people of more than average subtlety and intelligence. Notorious revolutionaries have suffered the same fate — witness the crowds who flock to Lenin's tomb, so as to worship the relics. And we know how far the USSR has pushed the cult of "positive heroes" and the damage thereby done both to literature and to historical accuracy.

Louise Michel might have escaped this fate, had she not been taken over by the communists. (She, the patron saint of anarchism!) Anarchists themselves, however, have played their part in this beatification, for they attach little importance to the past and are even more given to a *tabula rasa* approach than are the Marxists. Existing biographies of Louise Michel — by Emile Girault, Fernand Planche, Irma Boyer, Hélène Gosset, among others — suggest that, whatever the author's political allegiance, an excess of blind devotion has produced yet more legend-building.

One must add that writers from the other end of the political spectrum have treated Louise Michel with such

venomous contempt — *pétroleuse*,\* “shrew” and “madwoman” being among the milder epithets — that these biographers were under considerable temptation to overcompensate.

Obviously, a biographer cannot hope to understand his subject unless he feels at least a flicker of sympathy for that subject. But he should beware outright admiration. While he may hope to end up admiring his character, he should not start out with undue respect.

My own initial feeling toward Louise Michel, when I discovered her among the *pétroleuses*, was one of curiosity, mixed with an attitude which makes me prefer the Commune despite all its excesses to Versailles and, more generally, the vanquished to the victors and the victims to their butchers.

Louise Michel offers us the advantage that, unlike the other women of the Commune, she wrote a great deal — too much, in fact! — and while her outpourings are hardly literature, they do permit us to understand her somewhat better, to look for her true face behind all the public speeches and battles. Moreover, she lived a very long life and never ceased being an active participant in the events of the day. In fact, she acted upon her revolutionary faith literally to the day she died. This is a rare phenomenon: generally, we find that age brings with it a preference for repose over action, peace over struggle and the calm of one's garden over the tumult of public meetings. In short, age usually causes passion for the Revolution to wither along with the other passions, making way for more tranquil pursuits.

Not so with Louise Michel. She was always amazingly youthful and never ceased playing the singular role that she had created for herself. “Good Louise,” “the Red Virgin” (as her friends and innumerable crowds called her), that extraordinary old woman with her black gowns, her shabby little fur tippet and her silly hat, remained the high priestess of anarchism to the very end, though it brought her no financial gain.

She would undoubtedly have taken to the barricades in May 1968, urging the rebellious students on by word and deed.

\* a coined term, to describe women accused of deliberately setting fire to Paris with homemade kerosene (“petrol”) bombs during the final battles between Communards and the Versailles troops. There is still controversy over the true causes of the extensive fire damage of those last days of the Paris Commune of 1871 — *transl. note*

It's hardly likely, though, that those young people were thinking about their heroic grandmother or even knew that their protest (which they thought they had invented) was in fact the continuation of an old tradition.

For anarchism is the hope of a better society, one in which man shall be free. By now the evils of the governments born of twentieth-century revolutions have been documented. And so anarchism — the absence of government, the direct administration by people of their own lives — is still intact as an ideal, for it has never been tried. The fundamental difference between anarchists and Marxists is that the latter say anarchy will be the final stage of political evolution but meanwhile take none of the steps which would help lead to it, while anarchists want it right now, in all the confusion and disorder of right now.

Anarchy, then, is "the song of our tomorrows." History so far has brought us only blood and tears; man's hopes must take refuge somewhere.

I wish to thank all those who helped me in this work, especially MM. Choury, Bossi, Decker, Meurgey de Tupigny; Mmes Hubert and Harburger, Mlle Benoit, M. Hunink (Amsterdam) and Yvonne Lanhers.

*E.T.*

## I - MADEMOISELLE DEMAHIS

There's a problem right from the start. "In the year eighteen hundred and thirty, on the twenty-ninth day of the month of May, at six o'clock in the evening, before the undersigned Etienne-Charles Demahis, mayor of Vroncourt in the canton of Bourmont, department of Haute-Marne, appeared Claude-Ambroise Laumont, forty years of age, doctor of medicine domiciled in Bourmont, to declare that on the twenty-ninth day of the month of May, at five o'clock in the evening, a Miss Marie Ann *Michel*, housemaid living in the Vroncourt chateau, had given birth in said residence to a child of the female sex, whom he hereby presented and to whom he gave the name *Louise* and the surname *Michel*. The said declarations having been made, and the witnesses Joseph-Benoît Girardin, thirty-four years of age, cutler living in Vroncourt, and Claude Desgranges, thirty-four years of age, landowner in Vroncourt, having been introduced, declarer and witnesses signed in the presence of the undersigned the present act of birth, this act having first been read aloud to them. A. Laumont, doctor of medicine, Girardin, Desgrange, Demahis."<sup>1</sup>

This curious birth certificate sets the stage. Who was the father of this servant's illegitimate daughter? Was it Etienne-Charles Demahis, mayor of Vroncourt, before whom the declaration of her birth was made? Or his son, Laurent? The good people of Vroncourt speculated busily — and a number of biographers' pens have since joined the speculation, for that "child of the female sex" turned out to be the "Red Virgin," the

Great *Citoyenne*," the "Good Louise," the "*pétroleuse*."\* Well-intentioned hagiographers — Irma Boyer, for example<sup>2</sup>— claim that the sexagenarian mayor might well have been the father. In any case, she was certainly a Demahis: the membrane found between her toes was a hereditary trait in the family and Mme Demahis<sup>3</sup> tacitly recognized the claim by raising Louise as her own granddaughter. The behaviour of her son, Laurent, however — who so left the chateau to live on a neighbouring farm — would suggest that in fact it was he who had made the blonde servant a mother and then refused to marry her, despite the egalitarian principles with which he had been raised.

Marianne, one of six children of a widow named Marguerite Michel, had herself been raised in the chateau with the Demahis children, Laurent and Agathe.<sup>4</sup> Childish games can easily turn into games of another sort... Louise herself provides the key to the question of her birth in her *Mémoires*, provided one reads them through to the end (p. 459): "I am what is known as a bastard, but those who bestowed upon me the sorry gift of life did so freely; they loved each other. None of the miserable tales told concerning my birth are true, nor can they besmirch my mother. Never have I known a more honest woman." This "mad revolutionary" had a highly conformist attitude to virtue. In a letter to Victor Hugo, written long before her *Mémoires*, she explained: "My grandmother had raised the daughter of a poor widow in her own home. Her son loved that girl, and then abandoned her along with their child. She was my mother. I have been told of the dreadful storm which I, all unknowingly, thus caused to break out within the family... And that, Hugo, is why I am despised."<sup>5</sup>

Louise exaggerates. As a child, she may have suffered from being known as a "bastard," this may have given her (to use today's jargon) an "inferority complex," but it was in no way the fault of her paternal grandparents. Until their deaths, they raised her as the *demoiselle* of the chateau. Indeed, she was known in the region as Mademoiselle Demahis.

Old Etienne-Charles Demahis (who had prudently, come the French Revolution, run the aristocratic particle "de" in his surname together with the rest of that surname) was not one of those stiff and haughty country squires who yearn endlessly for

\* see transl. note p. 9

the "old days" and make a virtue (for want of anything better) out of their families' ancient names. Yet, his ancestry was such as to flatter any man's vanity.

It can be traced to the seventeenth century: there are records of an Etienne de Mahis, attorney in Aubigny, and a Jean de Mahis, Seigneur de Breuzé, who was elected councillor of Bourges. In 1696, Hozier's book of heraldry described the coat-of-arms of Etienne de Mahis, public prosecutor in Paris, as follows:

*"Argent, a chevron azure  
in chief two crescents gules  
and in base a duck sables.  
Supporters: two lions."*

It is highly appropriate that this heraldic bestiary should come so early in the story. Louise had a passion for animals all her life; she would surely have liked the little duck and the two lions (except, of course, for their association with nobility).

To continue: in 1705, a Joseph de Mahis, lieutenant-grenadier of the Saint-Sulpice regiment, was proclaimed a Knight of the Order of St. Louis by Louis XIV, "for his singular valour, his experience and his great talent in war" (a cannonball had shot off one of his legs in 1702). Throughout the eighteenth century, the legal profession carried on in this family from father to son: Etienne de Mahis was president of the Bar in the Paris parliament; his son, also an Etienne, was a King's Councillor and died at Vroncourt at the age of eighty-seven.<sup>6</sup> Etienne-Charles Demahis, Louise's grandfather, barrister in the Paris parliament prior to the Revolution, was thus the direct descendant of an imposing array of prosecutors, barristers and King's Councillors. His wife, Louise Charlotte Maxence Porquet, also belonged to a highly-esteemed family of magistrates. The nobility of France attended their wedding.<sup>7</sup> But they belonged, as well, to an intellectual nobility, for they were among the supporters of Voltaire, Rousseau and the Encyclopedists who had first helped prepare the Revolution and then (in many cases) denounced it in later years. Not the Demahis family, however: they maintained their republican convictions to the end.

The lineage was very different on the Michel side of the family. marianne Michel, the blonde blue-eyed servant, was born in Audeloncourt on April 20, 1808.<sup>8</sup> In her *Mémoires*, Louise Michel describes her mother's uncles, Simon, Michel and

Francis (handsome old men, with thick red hair), and her mother's brothers, Georges the miller, another Michel, and a third one who loved travelling and died in Africa. All these peasants had a taste for learning. An ancestor of theirs had once purchased, by the kilo, the entire contents of a library. Thanks to those old chronicles and novels (published, of course, with the king's sanction), they taught themselves to read. Then there were her grandmother's sisters and her mother's two sisters: Victoire, who remained in Audeloncourt, and Catherine, who settled with her husband on a farm near Lagny.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike the Voltarian Demahis family, the Michels were extremely pious. Louise's Aunt Victoire had entered the novitiate in the Langres hospice but was prevented by poor health from taking her vows. "Never have I known a more ardent missionary than my aunt. She loved everything that was exalting in the Christian religion: the sombre hymns, the evening visits to churches bathed in shadow, the lives of the virgins, so like the stories of druids, vestals and valkyries. All her nieces were swept up in this mysticism as well — I, perhaps, more easily than all the rest."<sup>10</sup>

Two ancestral portraits nicely capture these strong, and strongly contrasting, family backgrounds. One shows Marguerite Michel, the peasant woman with her fine "Gaullish" features peeping out from her pleated white coif. The other shows Mme Demahis, the eighteenth-century intellectual, her eyes burning with intelligence and her hair cut short in the fashion of the Empire, a lady who retained her youthful spirit all her life.<sup>11</sup>

The mingling of these two currents — the disciples of the Encyclopedists and the "Jacques"\* — was not all that fired Louise Michel's unbounded imagination. She also treasured family legends ("fallen with the garden roses, dead with the bees; those who told them to me shall never speak again") which drew in other ancestries as well: Bretons and Corsicans, green-eyed ships'-girls and wraith-thin witches roaming the wilderness.<sup>12</sup> *These* ancestors were far more immediate to Louise than any genealogy.

The Vroncourt chateau, whose ruins were later described by Barrès as "chilling every faculty of the soul," was the ideal setting for dreams and legends.<sup>13</sup> Its square towers and win-

\* nickname for peasants — *transl. note*

dowless southern façade led it to be known in the region as “the fortress” or “the tomb.” Even in Louise’s childhood, it was already dilapidated, “an immense tumble of ruins through which the wind blew as through a sailing ship.” To the east, a curtain of poplars and the blue mountains of Bourmont; to the west, the slopes and forests of Suzerin, from which wolves emerged to howl in the chateau courtyard during the fierce winter snowstorms.<sup>14</sup> The dogs howled back. Louise loved those winter nights when the family would huddle around the fireplace in an icy room, to read or to listen to stories. Grandfather Demahis, in his white flannel greatcoat, would recall the battles of the First Republic, “when the Whites and the Blues showed each other how to die like heroes,” or else — dropping the epic style — would evoke Molière’s laughter, Voltaire’s irony, the intellectual masters of his youth. Sometimes, Mme Demahis would seat herself at the piano and accompany her own songs.<sup>15</sup>

The surrounding region was also filled with legends. A very old woman named Marie Verdet (“she must have been a hundred”) told of the apparitions of phantom washerwomen at the Fontaine aux Dames. It is all quite reminiscent of Joan of Arc and her Fontaine aux Groseilliers, not so distant from Louise in time and space, despite the four centuries that separate them. (Rest easy, the comparison between Louise and Joan of Arc shall end there.) The first phantom washerwoman, said the old woman, wept for days gone by; the second for days that are; and the third for days to come. Then there was the “*feullot*,” red as fire, sometimes seen beneath the willows by the mill.<sup>16</sup> Marie Verdet talked about the folk traditions of long ago: people used to visit the ruins and conjure the spirits, carrying a piece of silver for the Devil, a burning candle for God, a white shirt for the dead...and a knife for the conjurer, in case he broke his oath.<sup>17</sup>

Louise learned the village songs as well, and never forgot them:

*Dans l'champ fauvé c'était,  
Un bel agé chantot...  
Dans le champ fauve c'était  
Un bel oiseau chantait  
Tout noir il était  
Si fort sanglotait.  
Que disait-il l'oiseau,  
L'oiseau de champ fauve...?*<sup>18</sup>



"Who would not have become a poet in the countryside of Champagne and Lorraine," a land whose roots go back to the most distant past? There were still routes in the district which had been paved by the "conquering Romans"...and, here and there, dismantled again by the "unconquered men of Gaul." 19

Louise's Demahis grandparents counterbalanced her cherished peasant legends and traditions by offering her the best possible education — the education befitting young ladies of good families who were kept at home rather than sent to the convent. At first, she went daily to the simple two-room village school (in fact, one-room, for the second room was the teacher's lodgings). She acquired a reputation for practical jokes. For example, during dictation she would write not only required text, but all the teacher's asides and interruptions as well. The end result was always something like: "The Romans were the masters of the world Louise do not hold your pen like a stick semi-colon..." When the teacher discovered this, however, he informed her that "if the inspector saw that, it would mean my dismissal." "I was overwhelmed with sorrow." Thereafter, Louise took care that her mischief was never of the sort that might put her "Master" at risk. 20

Her grandfather introduced her to Corneille, Molière and Hugo; later, at the age of seventeen, Lamennais' *Paroles d'un croyant* brought tears to her eyes. 21 When her cousin Jules (Aunt Agathe's son) spent vacations at Vroncourt, she read all the books he had brought with him from college. This inspired her to write a universal history of the world — to replace the one by Bossuet, which she found very boring. 22 Her grandmother saw to it that she learned music theory and piano, as a *demoiselle* should. 23

The rest of the family was somewhat annoyed at the type of education being given Louise. Aunt Agathe once exclaimed to Marianne, in the little girl's presence: "Are you mad, giving this child music lessons? She already tends to forget her position!" 24 Such remarks left bitter scars in Louise's memories, yet in her *Mémoires*, she said of Aunt Agathe: "I loved her enormously and she spoiled me a great deal." 25

Games, just as much as education, make an impression on children and help develop their personalities. Never, in all her long career as a teacher, did Louise Michel meet children "simultaneously so diligent and wild, naughty and considerate, lazy and ambitious" as her cousin Jules and herself. All

children climb trees, chase the pigs and throw apples at each other — but this pair would climb to the treetops and from there shout their “secrets” at each other: Jules had sent Mme George Sand a loveletter but received no answer; Louise had drawn a magic circle and tried to call up Satan, but with equal lack of response.

Louise made herself a “lute” out of an old piece of board. She made a second one for her cousin, and the children happily produced dreadful sounds together. They put on plays like *Les Burgraves* and *Hernani* (which they rewrote for only two actors), and enacted the scenes from the Revolution which their grandfather had so often told them. They built brushwood gallows behind the well in the courtyard and mounted the steps to martyrdom with cries of “Long live the Republic!” They were Saint-Just, Jean Huss, the Bagaudes\*; they searched history for its cruelties and injustices.<sup>26</sup> But Louise was also a very devout little girl, though this is never mentioned in her *Mémoires* (which reflect only that which she was later to become). She faithfully attended church, even “carried the Virgin,” an honour reserved for members of the congregation.<sup>27</sup> When her grandfather died, she even (briefly) considered devoting her life to God in order to save his Voltarian soul.<sup>28</sup> Louise Michel was not nearly as straightforward and consistent as she later wished to appear.

One thing *was* consistent, though: her love of animals. It started in Vroncourt, where there were dogs, cats, an old mare (whose head Louise and her grandfather tenderly covered over when they finally buried her beneath the acacia by the chateau’s bastion wall), a tortoise, a doe, a wolf, wild boars, bats, broods of orphaned rabbits that had to be spoon-fed, and mice that could be heard scurrying about behind the ancient green tapestries. And, of course, there were the horses, which came right into the chateau’s rooms to nibble bread and sugar from people’s hands. Louise had to go to the stables, however, to see the cows (Bioné, Bella and Nera), who looked up at her with large, sorrowing eyes. In the summer, the chateau was filled with robins, sparrows and meadowlarks.<sup>29</sup> Once, when Louise was eight or nine years old, the sight of a goose running about with its head cut off filled her with such horror that, for a

\* the Gaullish peasants who rebelled against Roman rule; by extension the term came to mean poverty-stricken rebels in general, or peasants in general, and usually both at once — *transl. note*

long time, she refused to eat meat.<sup>30</sup> She hated the peasants' cruelty to animals, and the way children casually tortured birds, kittens and puppies.<sup>31</sup>

It was only a short step from concern for animals to concern for human beings and the hardships of the peasantry. Conversation in the huts wasn't restricted to tales of the *feullot* and the phantom washerwomen. An old woman talked about the year the profiteers had starved the whole countryside; she and her husband and four children often went to bed without even bread in their bellies. "Poor folks just have to accept these things, they can't do anything about them." Louise, in a mixture of rage and pity, started to cry. "Don't cry like that, little one, it makes God cry, too." <sup>32</sup>

So Louise began helping the people who needed it most. She probably didn't yet dream (as she claims in her *Mémoires*) of changing the world, but she did begin to give away fruit, vegetables and even money she stole from her grandparents. Sometimes the peasants came to thank the old people for their gifts, and Louise would laugh at the resulting scene. Once, her grandfather offered to give her twenty *sous* a week, on condition that she stop stealing. "But I thought I'd lose money on the deal." She had filed down some old keys until they were the right shape to open the pantry door: "You've got the lock, so I've got some keys." But really, there was very little money in the Vroncourt chateau. The Demahis property brought in next to nothing, and the family verged on genteel poverty.<sup>33</sup>

All these little vignettes smack of a certain amount of halo-polishing and indeed, Louise writes them up with more than a touch of complacency. Yet they have been independently confirmed. Barrès (who once intended to write Louise's biography and therefore collected a good many verbal accounts of her life) wrote that "even as a child, she kept nothing for herself. She once gave her shoes away to a poor man." One aged crone, nearly a hundred years old, told him: "One day Louise was drinking coffee from a golden cup. I said to her, 'I'd rather have the container than its contents.' She answered, 'Oh! If that would make you happy...' She gave away everything she had." <sup>34</sup>

Few outsiders visited the chateau regularly, its inhabitants being far too original in their thinking to take pleasure in the company of the usual conformists. The Laumonts were frequent

visitors, however — father (the Bourmont doctor, who also enjoyed playing the flute) and son (a teacher in Ozières). Sometimes they all made music together, with Louise or Mme Demahis at the piano and M. Demahis playing his cello.<sup>35</sup>

Music-making was not the only pastime in the chateau. They also did a great deal of writing. Mme Demahis kept a "Family Book," in which she recorded all family events in verse. (Louise's world history went in there as well.) On her husband's name-day, for example (the feast of St. Stephen), Mme Demahis honoured him with this poem:

*Celui que nous fêtons est un saint très humain,  
Un bienheureux vraiment recommandable  
Qui sait et qui permet aux autres d'être aimables,  
Pour les pauvres pêcheurs ayant beaucoup d'égards...*

In short, a man worthy of Voltaire and Diderot. "All affection is his enemy The Graces and the Muses loveth he..."<sup>36</sup>

When one of her sons died, Mme Demahis transcended her own suffering to think of everybody else who suffered as well:

*O vous que le malheur poursuit  
Je partage votre souffrance  
Et je pleure dans le silence  
Mon fils et les malheurs d'autrui...<sup>37</sup>*

Old Demahis also like to try his hand at some poetry:

*A des antiquaires  
Vous voulez des antiquités?  
Nous voilà deuz dans les tourelles  
Que couvrent des nids d'hirondelles,  
Ma femme et moi, vieux et cassés.<sup>38</sup>*

This sort of word-play was a common pastime in eighteenth-century chateaux. Louise, as a child, loved these family customs and soon began to write verses herself on holidays and birthday.<sup>39</sup> Poetry became a much more serious affair, however, with the advent of Romanticism. Louise may have been a mischievous child, but she was also a dreamy disciple of Lamartine and Hugo. In Vroncourt, poetry was as natural a means of expression as was the murmur of the brook, or the wind breathing through the willows. Louise often hid away in the north tower to play her "lute" and sing, like Ossian,\* her poetry:

\* according to legend, a Gaelic bard of the third century. An eighteenth-century Scottish poet, James MacPherson, published "translations" of the bard's work which were, in fact, his own verse. The fraud created an international Romantic vogue for heroic "early Irish" themes — *transl. note*

*Je n'ai jamais franchi nos paisibles villages  
Et cependant mon front est avide d'orages.  
Seigneur, Seigneur, mon Dieu, livre mon aile aux vents,  
Ou rendez-moi semblable aux paisibles enfants,  
Que nulle voix n'appelle au soir dans les nuages.*<sup>40</sup>

Her poetry was often not very good but then, even Lamartine and Hugo — the giants of the day — left a great deal of bad verse behind them as well. Louise even dared to send some of her poetry to Hugo, who — oh, bliss! — replied and encouraged her to write again.

The child wondered constantly about the destiny that lay before her. She once wrote a graphologist named Vitu, whose articles she had found in the newspapers, sending him one of her poems and her signature ("Louise Michel," not "Louise Demahis"). It was an ambivalent sort of gesture, as much challenge as petition, for Louise had been strongly marked by her grandfather's rationalism and only half-believed in the occult sciences which were then so fashionable.

*Des ombres du tombeau, Nostradamus s'éveille  
Sous le nom de Vitu, le voilà journaliste...  
Eh bien, sire devin, voici ma signature...*

Did she have black hair? White hair? Did she prefer "shadow and mystery" or "the splendour of day"?

*Si j'ai rêvé la gloire, ou le cloître, ou l'amour?*

Or:

*Le murmure du saule et des roseaux sur l'onde  
Parlent-ils à mon coeur plus qu'une vieille croix?*

Would a galloping steed carry her off over mountains and through raging storms:

*Dis-moi, maître sorcier si, modest fileuse,  
Je vois couler ma vie uniforme et rêveuse...  
Dis-moi si j'aime mieux danser dans la prairie  
Que prier vers le soir à l'autel de Marie?*

And she threatened, should his horoscope turn out to be inaccurate, to cry aloud from "the topmost turrets"

*Qu'au devin ont menti les esprits inferneaux.*

Vitu had used the adjective "imperial" to describe the work of a famous poet. Some revelation! One didn't need a sorcerer's gifts to see that. But was he able to tell *her*, "an unknown, distant star," who she was, what she loved and what her fate would bring?

*Je défie et l'auteur et son latin lui-même.*<sup>41</sup>

Unfortunately, nobody knows if Vitu ever rose to the challenge. What a pity! The *demoiselle* of Vroncourt would surely have provoked a fascinating handwriting analysis and a very strange horoscope...

Her life so far had gone along very evenly, really very pleasantly. Laurent had married and fathered two more children, who treated their half-sister with great affection. Laurent himself even began to treat his illegitimate daughter with more warmth.<sup>42</sup> Then, on November 30, 1845, old Etienne-Charles Demahis died.<sup>43</sup>

Remember that Mme Demahis did not believe in life after death. She expressed all her sorrow and despair in a poem:

*Le deuil est descendu dans ma triste demeure.*

*La mort pâle est assise au foyer et je pleure.*

*Tout est silence et nuit dans la maison des morts...*<sup>44</sup>

Louise thought of devoting her life to God. She turned her tears into verse as well, thinking with terror what might happen when her grandmother died, leaving Marianne and her all alone:

*Hélas, pourquoi ces jours ont-ils passé si vite?*

*Déjà tu restes seule et sur ton front serein*

*J'ai peur de voir une ombre et que tu ne me quittes*

*Comme au jour où l'aieul mourut, tenant ma main...*<sup>45</sup>

Attempts had already been made to find a husband for Louise — after all, at the time marriage was the only acceptable future for a young woman, and the only alternatives were prostitution or the convent. Louise, however (unlike her mother), was not pretty. On top of that, she was illegitimate. The Demahis family, on the other hand, had provided a dowry and so marriage was not entirely impossible. Indeed, two suitors did come to vie for Louise's hand. She thought them ridiculous creatures "who followed each other around like geese, or haunting spirits." One of them had a glass eye, which Louise mocked rather cruelly. Worse, he was looking for a contemporary St. Agnes,\* and Louise had no intentions of filling the role. As for the other suitor — Louise threatened to turn him

\* an odd choice, given that the original was martyred in the fourth century for refusing a good marriage because she wished to remain a virgin and dedicate her life to God — *transl. note*

into a George Dandin.\*\* 46 Louise really hadn't the temperament to marry at all, though at this stage her ideas on the subject were nowhere near as clear as they were later to become (protestations in her *Mémoires* to the contrary). At the very least, one can say that the superior education she had received and the freedom she had been given to develop her personality were not likely to turn her into the female ideal of the reign of Louis-Philippe: a submissive girl, ready to become the obedient wife of a solid provincial bourgeois. However obscurely, Louise already dreamed of great love with a man worthy of such love — or no love at all.

Ever since the death of M. Demahis, his widow and Louise had been giving piano lessons. It earned them a little money, it distracted them from their sorrow, and it was useful to others. One of their pupils was a young woman named Adeline Beaudoin, who until then had been taking her music lessons at the convent. Fifty years later, the old spinster still remembered Louise, Mme Demahis, the piano, its keys so worn with playing that they looked "like teaspoons," and lunches taken in the dining-room with Marianne, though Mlle Beaudoin's sister ate in the kitchen. The dining-room contained a bed covered with black silk, on which rested a sword decorated with the long crêpe streamer of perpetual mourning: this had been the sword of old Etienne-Charles Demahis.<sup>47</sup>

Five years later, on October 23, 1850, Mme Demahis died as well.<sup>48</sup>

*J'étais triste déjà, pourtant la froide pierre  
Ne couvrait qu'un d'entre eux; et voici maintenant  
Qu'une autre fois encore aux murs du cimetière  
Le gouffre s'est rouvert, affreux, noir, effrayant...*<sup>49</sup>

The Demahis wanted to assure at least Louise's immediate future, and so left to her eight and a half hectares\* of land, worth something between eight and ten thousand francs.<sup>50</sup> Louise was still a minor, and so they also made arrangements for a tutor, M. Voirin, the former magistrate of Saint-Blin; a governess, Marianne; and a substitute tutor, the notary-public, M. Girault. The tutors were indeed faithful guardians of the legacy and took steps to preserve it for her. Louise intended to

\* cf. *George Dandin, ou le Mari confondu*, by Molières — the hapless Dandin is a rich peasant who marries an impoverished aristocrat and is led a sorry dance thereafter

\*\* almost twenty-one acres — *transl. notes*

remain single: "We have encouraged this disposition, in order that your children may, in turn, be *her* heirs," wrote M. Voirin to Mme Laurent Demahis (now a widow, and waiting her chance).<sup>51</sup>

The old, romantic chateau, which had been Louise's home for twenty years and influenced her so deeply, was to be sold. Marianne and Louise had to leave, though they had no idea where they were to go. Louise crept off to her turret, and wept:

*Adieu mon nid d'enfant, ma rêveuse retraite,  
Adieu ma haute tour ouverte à tous les vents...  
Tu reverras sans moi venir les hirondelles  
Qui dans les jours d'été chantent au bord des toits.  
Ne manquera-t-il rien, dis-moi, sur tes tourelles,  
Quand leurs tristes échos ne diront plus ma voix...*<sup>52</sup>

Louise was full of such despair, abandonment and sheer loneliness that she wrote again to Victor Hugo, seeking his comfort: "Hugo, you would understand the love a prisoner would feel for a single ray of light gleaming through his solitude. Let me therefore confess my thoughts to you, as if you were here before the fireplace in my grandmother's chair and I held your hand in mine as I so often held hers through the long evening hours..." She enclosed, "for you alone," the story of her life — extremely romantic pages that must have pleased the poet very much, with long descriptions of the chateau settling into ruins, its legendary curses, the Lady in White and the Sabbath rituals by the fountains. "But all I ever saw was moonbeams sleeping in the grass," the pond "whose reeds murmured like complaining voices" and the willows "that bowed low over the water when the village angelus-bell rang, as though they too honoured the Virgin Mary..." She confided in him the hurts and slights which she could no longer take to the Demahis for comforting. One day an old woman said to her, "Go sleep in the graveyard, child." Some little girls had flung at her, "Go join your father." And now, with her grandmother's death, she was being "alternately spurned and courted." She sent Hugo the outline of a faery opera; she told him she had just read *La Tristesse d'Olympio* and had been greatly moved by two of its lines:

*Ecoute, Olympio, Dieu fit nos âmes soeurs  
Et n'eut qu'un seul souffle en créant nos deux coeurs.*

She undoubtedly felt herself his "kindred soul" — a common illusion among impressionable female readers. But if



she were not, if she were only his guardian angel, then she dared offer him some advice. Was it true that the Bourbons might be called back from exile? If so, "it is your role, O poet, to be the first to raise your voice in support of such a beautiful, such a great and serious inspiration." Then she apologized for the length of the letter and promised that, in any event, she would not send another.<sup>53</sup>

But she did. Louise couldn't resist pouring out her soul to another soul worthy of those confidences. In March 1851, she wrote him once again, her last letter from the Vroncourt chateau, which had now been sold. "Ah, no. The letter that I sent you shall not be the last, though I pronounced it to be so in one of those moments of discouragement that led me to doubt everything and everyone, except you... Are you not a brother to me, Hugo? More than a brother, for we have but one soul." "She who had pledged herself to God" (this, therefore, was to be a platonic love) thanked him for having invited her to write frequently to him. She sent him some poems which she hoped would be published in *L'Événement*, under a masculine pseudonym. (Thanks to Daniel Stern and George Sand, male pen-names were very much the fashion.) "It seems to me that if people didn't know it had been written by a woman, its ideas might have some impact." In one of her poems, "A la Patrie," Louise begged amnesty for the troublemakers of May 1849 and condemned deportation:

*Royalistes ou républicains,  
Qu'importe le sceptre des rois,  
La baïonnette citoyenne,  
Les lys ou le vieux coq gaulois...*

For, taken as a whole,

*C'est la France de Charlemagne  
De Jeanne d'Arc et de Henri...*

The poem continued in this singular vein (conveniently forgotten by the time she came to write her *Mémoires*, in which she presents herself as staunchly republican from childhood on):

*Des rois je recherchais la trace  
Dans les récits de nos splendeurs.  
Mon luth ne savait que leur race  
Et ses exploits et ses grandeurs.*

Whatever had happened to grandfather Demahis' lessons on the French Revolution?

*J'ai maudits les hordes sacrées  
Qui de leur courage enivrée  
Combattaient pour la liberté.*<sup>54</sup>

There should be a general amnesty. The nation should be reconciled by a pardon that covered revolutionary and royalist both.

*Rendons et famille et patrie  
Aux fils du peuple, aux fils du roi.*  
Let pardon be the guiding rule:  
*Qu'il soit notre arche d'alliance  
Et Dieu protégera la France...*

At this stage of her life, the young *demoiselle* of Vroncourt was very similar to the God-fearing, right-thinking young girls who would later flock to *L'Action française*.<sup>\*</sup> O poet, raise your voice:

*Grâce pour les descendants  
O grâce au nom de Louis seize  
Pour les fils de la royauté  
Et pour les hordes populaires  
Miséricorde, car leurs pères  
Sont tous morts pour la liberté.*<sup>54</sup>

The poem was signed, "L. Michel Demahis." One may fairly call it a hymn to liberty — however one may choose to define that word — and liberty was to be one of Louise Michel's most consistent themes.

Marianne was most anxious about her daughter's future. Traces of her anxiety come through in the poems which Louise dedicated to her — poems hardly designed to calm maternal fears:

*Mère, pourquoi frémir, quand je te dis mon rêve?  
Le pêcheur endormi voit en songe la grève;  
Moi, je vois je ne sais quel mirage lointain  
Qui se mêle à l'aurore, à la nuit, au matin...  
Je suis toute en orage et rien ne m'inquiète...*  
Fortune, even life itself, were of no importance:  
*A celui dont l'amour est par-delà les cieux  
Dans l'immense infini plein d'astres radieux.*

The only love with which that love could be compared was the love she bore her mother. Therefore:

<sup>\*</sup> a daily paper (1908 - 1944) and a movement born of the Dreyfus Affair; ultra-nationalist, monarchist, anti-liberal and anti-democratic; supported the Vichy government during World War II — *transl. note*

*Pourquoi pleurer, quand, seul, à ce vaste infini  
Pourrait le disputer, mère, ton nom béni?* <sup>55</sup>

Marianne was not the slightest bit reassured by all this. A peasant woman, a servant, she knew that writing poetry and making music didn't earn a living. And one had to live. But how? Louise had refused the idea of marriage, she'd refused the idea of entering a convent (despite her resolves at the time of her grandfather's death); the only choice left was for her to become a schoolteacher. Until the age of twenty, the girl had lived a privileged life. Now, she would have to face life entirely on her own. "Mademoiselle Demahis" was dead. "Mademoiselle Michel, schoolteacher" was about to be born.

## II - MADEMOISELLE MICHEL

The exact chronology of events in Louise Michel's life is extremely difficult to determine, for her *Mémoires* are virtually the only source of information and in that book she keeps changing directions, covering her tracks, skipping essential points and going off on irrelevant tangents, almost as if she were trying to conceal something. (It is thoroughly modern in its incoherence...) But I think there is one simple good reason at the heart of this systematic refusal of chronological order: Louise Michel lied about her age. Whether sparring with the judicial system or providing biographical data under calmer circumstances, Louise consistently claimed to have been born in 1836, rather than (as was the case) 1830. This is a traditional practice on the part of beautiful women, but a curious indulgence by a plain woman who — as we shall see — was never preoccupied by affairs of the heart. Unfortunately, her school records, which might at least have enabled us to set precise dates for her life in Haute-Marne, were stolen in 1883 (probably by some local official who wanted a "souvenir" of the now-notorious lady).<sup>1</sup>

So we are left with Louise's word. According to that word, she spent a few months in the fall of 1851 with her mother at her Aunt Catherine's home near Lagny. Catherine's husband was afraid that Louise might not hold to her stated intention of becoming an elementary schoolteacher, abandoning pedagogy for the wail-o-the-wisp life of poetry instead. He accordingly enrolled her for three months in Mme Duval's institute in

Lagny, where his own daughter had trained. Louise briefly considered becoming an assistant schoolmistress, which would have meant continuing her studies in Paris. But, she writes, she did not wish to be separated from her mother at that time.<sup>2</sup>

It was during this same trip that she had a most important encounter — and yet, one which scarcely receives a passing mention in her *Mémoires* — “My mother and I saw [Victor Hugo] in Paris in the fall of 1851.”<sup>3</sup> That’s all. And that’s strangely little, considering she was talking about her “brother,” her “kindred soul,” her adored poet and confidant from Vroncourt days to whom she had sent countless letters in his exile.\* Louise says her mother was with her at the time of the meeting, but we have only her word for that. Louise, after all, was twenty-one years old at the time. It seems unlikely that she dragged Marianne all around Paris with her as a constant chaperon. Twenty years later, in 1870, she was to appear in Hugo’s *Carnets intimes* with the notation, “n.” According to the erotic code worked out by M. Guillemin\*\* (which is not necessarily to be believed), “n” stood for “nude.”<sup>4</sup> But in 1870, Louise Michel was forty, a rather advanced age at which to start playing the striptease, even in homage to the master poet. It seems far more likely that, if there *was* a relationship between them (amorous for her, erotic for him), it began in 1851. Hugo loved all women quite indiscriminately, the ugly and the slatternly included; he couldn’t have been unaffected by this girl’s burning emotions. Unfortunately, however, his *Carnets intimes* for that period are missing. And Louise threw a pious, proper, entirely bourgeois veil over the subject of her relationship with Hugo, so there is nothing to be learned there, either. Later on, she was just as equivocal in her account of her passion (almost certainly platonic) for Théophile Ferré. In this area at least, the “Red Virgin” was a thorough-going conformist, a perfect Victorian.

Whatever may have happened in Paris, Louise did decide not to stay there for her teacher-training. She returned to Haute-Marne with her mother and, while her mother went off to live with her own mother Marguerite and her sister Victoire, Louise went to Chaumont and did her normal-school studies with Mmes Beth and Royer. The student teachers were all

\* Hugo left France immediately after Napoleon III’s coup d’état of December 1851, not returning until the emperor’s downfall in 1870

\*\* Henri Guillemin, *Hugo et la sexualité*, Gallimard, Paris — transl. notes

book-mad: "The real world stopped at the door. We devoured every crumb of scientific knowledge that came our way, and just enough crumbs appeared to whet our appetites for the rest; but alas, there was never enough time to pursue that 'rest'."<sup>5</sup> They had to study for their examinations, earn their diplomas so that they might then earn their livelihoods, memorize the curriculum. "We thought that curriculum all-important" and only later, "when it shrank back to its proper dimensions," did they realize how little they knew.

Louise was consumed with intellectual curiosity. The Demahis had brought her up to believe that "schooling" was not synonymous with "culture" and that one had to go far beyond the textbook. She was enthusiastic about everything. Just as she had remembered the Vroncourt legends of the phantom washerwomen and the *feullot*, just as later she was to collect the Melanesian legends of New Caledonia, so now in Chaumont, she made note of the tales of the "diabolical arts." In her book *La Haute-Marne légendaire* (left unfinished, as so many of her books were), Louise described a macabre ceremony dating from the Middle Ages and thought to be still practised at the end of the eighteenth century. Every seven years, the story went, twelve men dressed as devils (twelve, like the twelve apostles or the twelve signs of the zodiac) and joined the Palm Sunday procession. They would practise their "devilcraft" until the feast of St. John and then stage the grand finale, the torture and burning of an effigy of Herod. As Louise noted: "No festival was complete without some torture in those days — or in our own, for that matter." It was also said that one year, Herod's soul had writhed in the flames and that same day a handsome singer had mysteriously vanished: "the victim of love's revenge." This crime put an abrupt end to the old tradition. Like all romantics, Louise adored the legends of crime and romance, and took a certain sadistic pleasure in the descriptions of martyrdom and torture.<sup>6</sup>

She continued to write poetry. Through the intermediary of M. Joly-Lahérard, a former correspondent for *L'Echo du Peuple*, she sent the editor-in-chief some of her verses. When the editor reacted favourably, M. Joly-Lahérard revealed that they were the work of "a young Miss." He added, "She could send you more, and some very clever prose as well. If you declare, as I hope you will, your intention of making her a regular contributor, then I shall tell you her name."<sup>7</sup>

Louise's literary debut in the local paper annoyed Mme Laurent Demahis a great deal, particularly since the girl had signed herself "Michel Demahis," thereby linking the family name with the highly suspect, entirely frivolous, field of poetry. Voirin, Louise's tutor, scolded her very soundly and was then able to write reassuring words to Laurent's widow: "I spoke to the author with some severity, telling her that the least of her sins was the fact she had committed so many errors of sense, grammar and style. There'll be no further improprieties, whether of publication, signature or style, for she now understands that she has behaved very badly, on all three scores." In that same letter, Voirin once again said that Louise intended to remain single and therefore urged Mme Demahis to remain on good terms with Louise, even if only for the sake of the inheritance: "Therefore, behave with moderation at all times. You will not regret it. Louise is a member of your husband's family; she is bound to it by moral sentiment, in the absence of any other tie."<sup>8</sup>

On September 27, 1852, having finally received her teaching diploma, Louise declared that she intended to open a private school in Audeloncourt. The mayor granted her the necessary permit: "Louise Michel...being in possession of an elementary schoolteacher's licence, has made to us the following declaration, duly accompanied by the documents required by article 27 of the education act of March 15, 1850 and the decree of October 7 of that same year. The undersigned has declared to the mayor of the municipality of Audeloncourt her intention to run a private school for girls in the Causelle home, on Rue du Ham."<sup>9</sup> Louise, as required, forwarded this declaration to the departmental prefect on October 1. The prefect, however, took his time with it and on October 28, she had to ask him to acknowledge its receipt.<sup>10</sup> Louise was later to claim that she opened a private school so that she would not be required to pledge allegiance to the Emperor. This is possible but not probable, for her republican sentiments were not yet very strong. Each of her students paid one franc a month and, since she was too young to be allowed to run a residential school, children from the outlying areas were lodged in the homes of local citizens.<sup>11</sup>

While in Audeloncourt, as later in Millières, Louise continued to send her poetry to *L'Echo de la Haute-Marne* (successor to *L'Echo du Peuple*, which abruptly turned into a

rather compromising title when Napoleon III became emperor). These poems were as orthodox, as respectable as even the authorities might wish. *Le Voile du Calvaire*, for example:

*Jésus sur son épaule avait penché la tête.*

*Il s'éleva partout un souffle de tempête*

*Et toute clarté s'éteignit.*

*L'horrible mort trembla, les rochers se fendirent*

*Et comme Christ mourait, les tombes se rouvrirent*

*La mer frissonna dans son lit.*

Or another example, *Rorate Coeli desuper*:

*Versez, grands cieux ardents, versez votre rosée.*

*Des souffles ennemis, la terre reposée,*

*A germé le Sauveur...*

The time had come for the hawk and the warbler, the wolf and the lamb, to be reconciled:

*Bénissez Israël,*

*Et bénissez Jacob: laissez tomber votre onde*

*Partout où l'on a soif, Seigneur, et que le monde*

*Se transfigure en ciel.*

Louise was inspired to particularly indignant verse by the murder of Bishop Sibour by a priest, during the inauguration of the Novena of St. Geneviève in Saint-Etienne-du-Mont. Her poem evoked all the world's calamities — famine, poverty, plague — and then:

*Quand semblable à l'autour planant sur la campagne*

*La peste étend sur tous les voiles du tombeau,*

*Paisible, on voit s'asseoir en haut de la montagne*

*La mort comme un berger qui compte son troupeau...*

Bishop Sibour had rallied to the Empire, thereby drawing down upon his head all Victor Hugo's curses from his distant rock,\* but nonetheless, his death brought tears to the eyes of that "republican," Louise Michel:

*Mais quand l'impie armé vient frapper sa victime*

*Jusqu'aux pieds des autels, quand au fond du saint Lieu*

*De notre siècle étrange, épouvantable crime,*

*Le sang du prêtre enfin se mêle au sang de Dieu...*

When, in addition,

*Un prêtre est l'assassin, alors l'enfer lui-même*

*L'enfer qui l'a poussé, recule en frémissant...*

What could one do? Pray and weep, your forehead to the

\* Hugo spent years of his exile in the Channel Islands — *transl. note*



dust; don the hairshirt and keep nightly vigil.

Two martyrs in eight years. The first, Bishop Affre, had died on the barricades for his homeland, in June 1848.

*L'autre au pied de l'autel pour le nom de Marie*

*O Paris, que fais-tu, dis-moi, de tes pasteurs?*<sup>12</sup>

By temperament, Louise was, and would always remain, a "committed" writer. Literature had to be a form of action and at this time, action to her meant charity. In September 1853, this schoolteacher who (she tells us) was always at daggers drawn with authority wrote the prefect of Haute-Marne, M. Froidefond, to suggest ways of combatting misery and want in the department. "We must set up an office of charitable endeavours, create job-sites and public workshops wherever employment is scarce. Without work, people lack bread, and when they lack bread, they often find gunpowder and bullets..."<sup>13</sup> Her appeal for social reform had some results: the prefect and his wife sponsored a public subscription drive for funds with which to open an office of charitable endeavours and a public workshop, just as she suggested. Louise herself contributed one hundred francs, a considerable sum of money at the time. Her appeal "to philanthropists" was accompanied by a poem entitled, *Aux pauvres: l'humanité bienfaisante*.

*Et le Christ se penchant sur les cités bruyantes,*

*Sur nous laisse tomber des pleurs.*

It was the role of the poet to call for charity among men, rather than war among nations:

*Prie à genoux la foule, appelle à la croisade,*

*Et debout sur la barricade,*

*Tenant en mains la sainte Croix,*

*Dis à tous: ce n'est plus le siècle de la guerre*

*Combattons, mais le crime et l'horrible misère...*

And so Louise mounted her first barricade, but on behalf of social peace. Alas, poets were too frequently unheeded, and so Christ must intervene: the rich must open their purses so that workshops might in turn open for the poor. And then,

*Retrouvant partout la paix de l'Evangile,*  
the reign of Peace would finally begin.<sup>14</sup>

This was a characteristic illusion of the 1848 uprising, a time when priests solemnly blessed "liberty trees" and people hoped that the Gospel would be enough to change the world.

I obviously don't fault Louise Michel for having been a devout Catholic. One may, however, fault her for hiding this

fact in later years and pretending in her *Mémoires* that she had always been the revolutionary she later became. The notion of retroactive historical truth, which Louise shares with the communists, poses a good many problems. It is especially unfortunate in the case of Louise Michel, for it obscures the inherent logic of her evolution from compassion and religious fervour to a sense of justice and revolutionary fervour. Her driving instinct for charity never changed; the changes came in the ways she chose to express that charity.

Her own descriptions of her early years as a schoolteacher are very hard to reconcile with this highly orthodox piety. Republican convictions and deep religious sentiment are not necessarily in contradiction to each other, but during the Second Empire, they seldom co-existed. Louise harps on her disputes with the authorities, but never mentions the good relationship she had with the prefect. In fact, she tells us that she had her Audeloncourt students sing the "Marseillaise," which was then considered a seditious song,<sup>15</sup> that she taught them it was sacrilege to pray for the Emperor and that they therefore filed out of the church as soon as the congregation began chanting, "Domine, salvum fac Napoleonem" (though she later sent a petition to this same Napoleon<sup>16</sup>), and that as a result, denunciations rained down on her from all sides, causing poor Marianne more and more anxiety.<sup>17</sup>

Whatever may have sparked village gossip, there was some, and it soon reached the ears of the rector of the departmental Academy, M. Fayet. The primary-school inspector, M. Henry, had given Louise a good rating: "This young woman deserves the respect of all decent people," though her school had struck him as being "neither particularly good, nor particularly bad." M. Fayet warned the young schoolmistress, however, that if the denunciations proved to be well-founded, she would have to answer to the academic council.

But M. Fayet and his wife were immediately charmed by Louise's engaging personality. "Her attitude is somewhat cavalier, but always very frank and entirely acceptable. It pleased us a great deal and often amused us. Indeed, her good-natured way of admitting her own flaws would have disarmed much more severe listeners than ourselves."<sup>18</sup>

Louise, in turn, very much enjoyed the Fayet's home, for they reminded her somewhat of her grandparents. Seated with them by the fireside, she would admit that the accusation *was*

well-founded, that she was a republican, that she wanted to continue her studies and hoped to go to Paris. His wife always took the young woman's side, though the rector himself tended to hesitate over his answers. Doves flitted through the sunlit rooms, exactly as in Vroncourt. "In their home, it always seemed to be a springtime morning."<sup>19</sup>

Louise confided in M. Fayet about more than her schoolroom difficulties. The French Academy was holding a poetry contest on the subject of "The Acropolis of Athens." Should she enter it? Did he know the conditions of the contest?<sup>20</sup> She also told him that her mother still occasionally talked about finding her a husband — "but I have no wish to get married." He answered, "No-one, not even your mother, has the right to impose his will upon you."<sup>21</sup>

Louise thanked the rector in grateful verse:

*Vous avez eu pour moi quelques mots d'espérance,  
Vous avez compris que dans les nuits, parfois,  
Le poète troublé par quelque songe immense  
Laisse parler son rêve et met sans défiance  
Son âme entière dans sa voix...*

*Merci, j'aurai toujours pour vous un chant de lyre,  
Une prière au ciel, soit que les ouragans  
Sur de lointaines mers balancent mon navire  
Soit qu'il vogue, paisible, au souffle du zéphyr  
Un reflet d'azur à ses flancs.*<sup>22</sup>

M. Fayet thought her a great poet, an opinion which we are not required to share.<sup>23</sup>

Following these discussions with M. Fayet, Louise spent two days in Chaumont "on business." She went to M. Sucot's bookstore, which received all the latest works from Paris and accordingly kept her forever in debt.<sup>24</sup> She visited her own former teachers and some friends as well. One of those friends was a certain Clara, who shared her love of practical jokes. Together, they'd go about drawing donkeys' ears in red chalk on the doors of "horrible people." This greatly upset the sober-minded citizens of Chaumont, who interpreted these mysterious markings either as the egalitarian triangle, or as the sign of some unknown instrument of torture.<sup>25</sup> The two friends would then giggle like schoolchildren (or nuns). Louise never lost this love of mischief.

She soon became involved in something much more serious than the donkeys'-ears escapade, something that might have

had really unpleasant repercussions but for the benevolence of the prefect, M. Froidefond. (He already knew her, as we have seen, though this fact is omitted in the *Mémoires*.) According to Louise, and we must take this version with a grain of salt, the trouble began when the Chaumont newspaper published a story of hers about a martyr, which began as follows: "During Domitian's reign, philosophers and scholars were banished, the pay of the praetorian guard was increased, gladiatorial combat re-established and everybody adored their gentle emperor, even as they waited patiently for someone to stab him. For some, the grand finale, the apotheosis, had already happened; for others, it was yet to come. That is all. The setting is Rome, 95 A.D."<sup>26</sup>

The prefect read in this story an insult to Napoleon III and called Louise to his office. "But for your youth, we could justifiably deport you to Cayenne."\* (Louise, of course, was not as young as he thought; by then she was at least twenty-four.)

"I replied that those who thought they recognized Bonaparte in my portrait of Domitian were as guilty of insulting him as I was, but that yes, I had had him in mind." She then claims to have added that she would enjoy setting up a school in Cayenne and since she couldn't afford to pay for such a trip herself, she would happily accept any offer to send her there.<sup>27</sup>

This anecdote is very much in keeping with the woman that Louise was to become, but much less probable in the young lady praised by M. Fayet as being "irreproachable from a moral, religious and social point of view."

Louise got away with a simple reprimand, but the incident had unexpected consequences in the village. People learned that Mlle Michel had been called in to the prefect's office. What an honour! A man soon came to the schoolmistress, asking her to speak to the prefect on his behalf. Louise explained that the prefect had spent his time threatening to deport her to Cayenne, but the man would not be swayed. Finally, she agreed to send a letter and this (as later rewritten by memory) is what she said: "*Monsieur le préfet*, the person to whom you so kindly promised a trip to Cayenne has been hounded into sending you a letter of recommendation on behalf of M. X... He's as stubborn as a mule; I can't make him understand that

\* the capital of French Guiana and for many years the centre of French penal settlement in Guiana — *transl. note*

a letter from me is the best way there is to get himself kicked out of your office. Let him learn through his own experience that I was right to refuse. I beg you, *monsieur le préfet*, not to forget the little matter of the voyage which we were discussing..."<sup>28</sup>

This letter fits so well with all the rest of Louise's reconstruction of history that one really must question its authenticity. Yet it seems that the good man finally received what he wanted from the prefect and came back to thank Louise for her help. If that is so, one must conclude that the prefect had a fine sense of humour.

After one year in Audeloncourt, Louise received a post in Paris as an assistant teacher (thanks to M. Fayet) and so closed down her village school. But in a few months' time, her mother fell ill and Louise returned to Audeloncourt. The *Mémoires* contains no mention at all of this brief stay in Paris; it came to light only because her request to reopen her old village school has survived the years. She wrote the mayor on November 3, 1854 and the prefect one day later: "Dear Sir, having been obliged to leave Paris, where the rector of Haute-Marne had so kindly obtained me employment, in order to be near my ailing mother, and being unable either to leave her in her present state or to remain any longer without employment, I have the honour to inform you of my intention to reopen the private school for girls which I ran in this village last winter. I wrote the mayor of Audeloncourt to this effect on November 3, promising not to admit to my school any children presently enrolled in the Audeloncourt primary school, in order to avoid and discution [*sic*]." <sup>29</sup> This almost incoherent request was accompanied by a testimonial from the parish priest of Audeloncourt (who seemed quite unaware that Louise made her students leave the church during the prayers for Napoleon III): "Mademoiselle Louise Michel has conducted herself with perfect decorum ever since her arrival in Audeloncourt."<sup>30</sup> The mayor also testified to her "excellent conduct."<sup>31</sup> M. Fayet himself supported Louise's request: "Mademoiselle Michel is better endowed with imagination than with judgment, but she is an honest woman and I see no reason to oppose her reopening the school which she recently closed in order to take up a position as an assistant teacher in a Paris residential school."<sup>32</sup>

One month later, however, Louise realized she had no students left, for "they had all been enrolled in the elementary

school." On December 3, 1854, therefore, she asked permission to open another private school, this time in Clefmont, "finding this more advantageous from every point of view." She made the required declaration to the inspector once again and once again, M. Fayet "readily agreed."<sup>33</sup> But Louise did not stay long in Clefmont either. In the fall of 1855, Julie Longchamp, who had become a friend of Louise's in Chaumont, requested permission to open a school in Millières.<sup>34</sup> Louise spent two years working with her there, leaving behind her nothing but "good memories" among the townspeople, though they sometimes felt she had her head "a bit in the clouds."<sup>35</sup>

The few poems from that period which managed to survive the subsequent prudent destruction suggest a dreamy, idealistic woman, the target for a certain amount of village gossip and worried about her future:

*Je suis le lion mourant, superbe et solitaire,  
Que le chasseur poursuit jusque sur son rocher.  
Je suis le lys brisé que, de leur pied vulgaire  
Foulent la chèvre errante et l'ignorant berger...<sup>36</sup>*

She stood out from those around her, she wasn't like them and, in her loneliness and despair, called out to Victor Hugo:

*Qui donc sera mon guide? Est-ce Mozart ou toi?  
Je veux voir par-delà les routes de la terre  
Si, dans quelque phalange, il y a place pour moi...<sup>37</sup>*

She left once again. Why did she do this, when turning her back on the village schools of Haute-Marne also meant deserting the mother she loved so dearly? "It hurt me a great deal," she wrote, "to leave them [her mother and grandmother] alone. But I still hoped that I would be able to provide them with a comfortable future."<sup>38</sup> Yet Marianne would have been perfectly content to live out her days in a quiet village, taking care of the housekeeping while Louise taught school. Louise must have had other motives than "a comfortable future" for her mother; it's just that she always liked to present herself as being much more single-minded than she really was. Probably, she was tired of a mediocre and apparently pointless existence, playing the role of local muse, caught up whether she liked it or not with small-town gossip which, "though it was not serious [says M. Fayet] must have tortured her nonetheless."<sup>39</sup> Her passionate soul felt it was called to different battles, worthy of a different fate. It really didn't matter how the adventure might turn out, she was off to Paris. It called her as it called every

provincial who wanted to change his life — or change life itself: from Julian Sorel to Rastignac, Pauline Roland to George Sand. Paris took your measure, and you won or you lost on the grand scale.

For schoolmistress Mlle Michel, it was a second chance to risk all, to become the woman she had it in her to become.

*Mais pour moi, je m'en vais sans crainte dans l'espace.*

*Où? Je l'ignore encore. Je cherche le chemin.*

*Si, dans le grand désert, nul voyageur ne passe*

*Qu'importe: j'irai seule à la voix du destin.*<sup>40</sup>

As understanding as ever of this strange young woman, M. Fayet gave her a letter of introduction to a Paris school inspector. She wrote him in reply: "Once again, I am torn from the tranquil life and thrown into stormy seas without plans or resources. But I have courage, youth and infinite faith in God."<sup>41</sup>

### III - THE GROWTH OF LOUISE MICHEL

And so, with this as her armour and with the recommendation of M. Fayet, Louise found herself a position as assistant schoolmistress in a *pension* run by Mme Vollier, at 14 Rue du Château-d'Eau. For once, Louise thanked M. Fayet in prose: "Thanks to you, I am doing very well. Your protection and that of your wife have brought me luck."<sup>1</sup> She had just been joined by her friend Julie Longchamp, with whom she had run the school in Millières.<sup>2</sup> The "Vollier girls," as they were called, dressed like sisters and Mme Vollier insisted that they be well turned out, so as to be a credit to her institution. Louise Michel describes one of her outfits (which is most unusual, for she wasted little breath on such frivolous subjects): a white crêpe hat decorated with daisy clusters, a dress of black grenadine and a lace shawl. All this cost her less than one might think, thanks to the Marché du Temple, which obligingly sold clothes on the strength of promissory notes.<sup>3</sup> (Credit is not an invention of the twentieth century!) The rest of Louise's money (which consisted of the small sums that poor old Marianne could send her from time to time) went for music and books.

Two of Louise's cousins were also teachers, one at Putreaux and the other at La Chapelle. "There was no situation in which one would have had less money, but no situation in which one needed less money either. We were really quite Bohemian."<sup>4</sup> Some "literary ladies" in their circle lived even more precariously than that. But they laughed at it all when



they got together Thursday evenings, over steaming cups of coffee.<sup>5</sup>

Marianne, however, wasn't laughing. Respectable country folk kept telling her that her daughter would never earn a living, that a teacher earned less than a cook, that she shouldn't send Louise any more money, *et cetera*. To reassure her, Mme Vollier, Julie and Louise decided to form a partnership. The resulting contract, in all its solemn legal splendour, was then sent to Marianne and managed to still the malicious tongues.<sup>6</sup> Yet it was a short-lived partnership. Julie Longchamp received a small sum of money from her family, which she used to establish a school in the outlying district of Saint-Antoine. Louise chose not to follow her friend (who was young) and stayed instead with Mme Vollier (who was old and needed her help). She did, however, give music lessons every Thursday evening at Julie's school.<sup>7</sup>

All this left little time for holidays — a mere eight days a year. Marianne came to Paris to see her daughter and quickly became close friends with Mme Vollier. What she saw hardly reassured her about her daughter's "future." One day, for example, the old ladies were presented with a promissory note which Louise had signed for some books. Mme Vollier paid the note out of her rent money and Marianne immediately reimbursed her. She did, however, point out to her daughter that these impulsive purchases caused her real sacrifice. "So I stopped buying books for a long time, but it was very hard. There were always so many publications to tempt me."<sup>8</sup> This cavalier approach to money, which people have always admired in Louise Michel, is undoubtedly a virtue — as long as it has no unfortunate repercussions on others. Louise claimed that she moved to Paris so as to guarantee her mother's old age, but in fact she always remained at least partially dependent on the old woman. Saints and revolutionaries do have their awkward side... In 1865, Marianne sold all her remaining Demahis land except for one small vineyard, and with the proceeds purchased a private day-school for Louise at 5 Rue des Cloys.<sup>9</sup>

Louise was absolutely delighted and shared her joy with M. Fayet: "Allow me to inform you of my great happiness in finally managing to buy a school. I think it is the regard which you have always shown towards me that has brought me this good fortune. I believe that you will be pleased by this news."<sup>10</sup>

Mme Vollier, who had been assured a small income by her sons, came with Louise to set up the new school. The number of students slowly grew and they were "quite well-provided with teachers."<sup>11</sup> But then Mme Vollier died of apoplexy and Caroline Lhomme — an ex-schoolmistress who had taught "all Montmartre" to read, now old, frail, seeking refuge — came to join Louise, bringing with her some additional students.<sup>12</sup> In 1868, near the end of the Empire, Louise opened another school at 24 Rue Oudot. This time her companion was a Mlle Poulin, another human derelict, ravaged by chronic chest disease, who then stayed with Louise until she died.<sup>13</sup>

Such goodness and charity was typical of Louise. She taught lessons in her school, gave extra classes, yet always found time to read to the blind, visit the sick, ask alms for the poor. "She had an irresistible way of putting things, and she'd underline her words with a reproachful look from her great soft eyes," said one of her colleagues who, in later years, was to criticize her very severely. She herself lived on nothing, but her friends could still complain of her endless raids on their pocket-books. Whenever she was given a bit of money, there was always some "highway robber" or "slut" hovering nearby to relieve her of it.<sup>14</sup> When people told her that her protégés hardly deserved the effort she made on their behalf, she would reply, "If they cheat me, that's too bad for them."<sup>15</sup>

Her pupils loved her. They'd scamper around their teacher, "squealing, shouting, hanging on her tattered old dress, adoring her and adored in return,"<sup>16</sup> as Clemenceau\* was to write a little later on. It was a strange school anyway, this school of Louise's, with its white mice, its tortoise, its grass snake and its beds of moss.<sup>17</sup> "I can't say it was entirely *proper*, as the Sorbonne understands the word," Clemenceau also wrote. "It was something of a free-for-all, with some highly unusual teaching methods but, taking everything into account, you had to agree that instruction was being offered."<sup>18</sup>

For Louise, however, it wasn't enough to give basic education to the children who came to her, using methods of her own invention (some of which have since been adopted in modern pedagogy). Her pity reached out to the abnormal as well.

\* Georges Clemenceau (1841 - 1929); physician, journalist, radical Republican; elected to the National Assembly on February 5, 1871; mayor of the eighteenth arrondissement; twice prime minister of France (1906 - 1909 and 1917 - 1919)

— *transl. note*

She believed they could be educated, she believed teachers could hope to awaken a flicker of intelligence in their minds. In 1861, she published an extraordinary little booklet for its time: *Lueurs dans l'ombre: plus d'idiots, plus de fous*.<sup>\*19</sup> The text was in fact only a preface and she had to pay publication costs herself. She dedicated it to her mother ("May these pages bring her the sweetest of memories"), Adèle Esquiros ("who brought me hope, when my soul was filled with death and darkness") and Mme Vollier ("as testimony to my respect and affection"). And then, so as to include all those whom she loved, she quoted several verses from Victor Hugo:

*Je suis celui que rien n'arrête  
Celui qui va  
Celui dont l'âme est toujours prête  
A Jéhovah.*

After which she modestly quoted from her own poetry, setting up a kind of duet with her beloved master:

*Moi, je suis la blanche colombe  
Du noir arceau  
Qui pour l'arche à travers la tombe  
Cherche un rameau.*

All in all, a strange beginning for an essay on pedagogy and remedial training. In fact, the essay was nothing of the sort, it was really a lyric poem expressing her opinions of the time: "Do you hear the distant thunder of horses' hooves through the brooding night?... Do you see the banners being unfurled? Is it a road or is it a ship's sail, gleaming white on the far horizon?... Revolutions are now being moulded in the mysterious crucibles of the infinite..." Louise was already dreaming of revolutions, but vague as they were, they were definitely still spiritual in nature. Latter-day Prometheuses would steal fire from the heavens, not in defiance of God "but clothed in the very splendour of God." The heavenly fire was still the thoroughly Christian one of faith, hope and charity. Louise had a quasi-mystic vision of it all: the city of God would open its doors and the world would lay down its weapons to march, in peace, to a single goal: "the beautiful, the magnificent, under the eyes of God." Dreamers are poets, poets are prophets (here an implicit tribute to Hugo) and so it is

\* "Light Among the Shadows: No More Idiots and No More Madmen — *transl. note*

poets who are destined to open the gates to the future. Yet all this does not take us as far from her supposed subject as one might think. Louise was still a dualist and spiritualist,\* and so her pamphlet argues that the soul, breath of God, is capable of influencing other souls through its strength, will, intelligence and love. By these virtues, the soul may "heal the idiots and madmen." One must seek patiently to exercise the "paralyzed intelligence of the idiot." In the case of the madman, "his soul pursues his reason, which flees before it." One must try "every approach," by every means possible: science, research, devotion and, above all, "faith in mankind." She spoke of the "sciences" so admired by Balzac, phrenology and magnetism. One must first teach the idiots and the insane "to see, to feel, to desire" and then lead them to the power of reason. This schoolteacher of 1861 could hardly imagine psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, but nonetheless it was a flash of genius (and she often had such flashes) which made her refuse to abandon the mentally ill to their misery and instead insist that they could be helped. There was a precondition, however (and here she falls back into her mysticism): those who would undertake this task must "have seen the splendour of the triangle of fire; they must believe it, breathe it and love it."

Her words were so striking, her conviction so complete, that she managed to enlist a few other teachers in this crusade. As the witness\* to these undocumented years (whom we have already quoted) put it: "She so bewitched us that we set up a loose sort of association and gave our spare time to the education of the idiots."<sup>20</sup>

To teach the young, help the poor, care for the sick, read to the blind, seek to awaken the souls of "idiots and madmen" — all this would have been quite enough activity for a woman of more limited, and less varied, possibilities. Louise, however, continued to write. For her, poetry was almost a biological necessity, a catharsis. In this she was truly a poet and would remain one all her life, though surely her life itself was the best of all her poems. Sometimes, she would turn a melancholy eye (the other side of Louise Michel) on the

\* in the specific sense of the philosophic doctrine which holds that spirit exists independently of matter (thus, the opposite of materialism, the philosophy that she was later to adopt) — *transl. note*

\* a M. Chincholle, later journalist with *Le Figaro* and her "devoted enemy" — *transl. note*

accumulated pages: "I open my old notebooks at random. How many songs have disappeared, how many tears been shed, how many hopes extinguished..."<sup>21</sup> Like all women, she pondered love, the great love which still eluded her, for she had met no man worthy of the term:

*Oui, si j'aimais d'amour, ce ne serait que Dieu  
Ou le démon rebelle, ange aux regards de feu  
Dont le front resplendit de flammes et d'étoiles...*<sup>22</sup>

She was much less selective with her poetry than her love. She sent verses to *Le Journal de la Jeunesse*, *La Soeur de Charité*, which was run by Adèle Esquiros, and *La Raison*, run by Adèle Caldelar, using variously the names Louise Michel, Louis Michel and Enjolras (in tribute to Victor Hugo).<sup>23</sup> "And I very seldom knew which ones were published."<sup>24</sup> This apparent detachment, however, was probably more pose than reality. She was, after all, as of January 25, 1862, a member of the Union of Poets, a society of mutual help and encouragement ("Let us help each other"), whose aim was to "illuminate all poetic talents" ("Strength Through Unity").<sup>25</sup>

Using her pseudonym of Enjolras, Louise joined the Literary Alliance and took part in the quarrel which set Alexandre Dumas against the Baron Sirtema de Grovestins. This little-known Baron, obscure author of historical and diplomatic studies, had published a work under the banner of the Literary Alliance, entitled, *Les Gloires du romantisme appréciées par leurs contemporains et recueillies par un autre bénédictin*.<sup>\*</sup> The Baron, obsessed with genealogy and family honour, attacked Alexandre Dumas for his ancestor "of the black race" and for the illegitimate birth of his father, himself and his son. Such was the level of this purported "literary" critique. Enjolras took offence: herself a member of the Literary Alliance, she wished to dissociate herself from such "infamy." In October 1862, she made her position clear, so clear that "it would be impossible to establish the slightest convergence between my literary sentiments and those of the Baron Sirtema de Grovestins."<sup>26</sup>

Let us try to establish a bit of order in Louise's flood of poetry — and acknowledge that in so doing we are untrue to Louise, for whom disorder was life itself and who claimed not

\* "The Glories of Romanticism, Appreciated by Their Contemporaries and Collected by Another Worthy Scholar" — *transl. note*

even to know which of her efforts were ever published. And she was, indeed, to "forget" many verses over the years, thanks to her habit of systematically omitting those things which later became inconvenient.

We may start with a March 1858 poem, a surprising work for the republican she later claimed already to have been at this date. It was a petition to the Emperor on behalf of Orsini\* and his fellow conspirators. True, it is the role of the poet to beg mercy, and her master Hugo had often done so without suffering loss of public esteem. But Louise went so far as to offer her prayers for the Bonaparte dynasty!

She sent this poem to a certain "monsieur" whom she believed in a position to present it to Napoleon III himself. The idea of winning pardon for Orsini was "an obsession." The image of his torments overwhelmed her, "raised a storm in my soul."

*Miséricorde. Sire! Oh, quel que soit le crime,  
Le pardon est si beau...*

To grant pardon "is almost to be God." She asked this favour in the name of the Emperor's own son:

*Grâce au nom de cet ange assis sur votre trône,  
Au nom de cet enfant que Dieu vous a donné.  
Grâce, afin qu'à son tour, il porte la couronne...*

Having appealed to the earthly angel, Louise then invoked the celestial ones:

*Les anges se diraient en se voilant la face:  
Pourquoi ce sang encore en France répandu...*

Yes, the crime was grave, but the wait for death even more cruel: visions of the scaffold, hideous phantoms, the waiting hangman, the jeering mob. Grant pardon, that God may give "to France, peace, and to the world, tranquility" and that the Napoleonic dynasty may continue:

*Grâce afin qu'à vos fils passe votre couronne  
Que l'ombre de la Croix protège leurs tombeaux.*

She omits nothing, not even the death of Bishop Sibour:

*Qu la religion protège la patrie...<sup>27</sup>*

It is not known if this exhortation ever reached the Emperor. Even if it did, it was in vain. Louise was later to "forget" this petition, along with her poem on the death of

\* Felice Orsini (1819 - 58), who made an unsuccessful attempt on Napoleon III's life in 1858 — *transl. note*

Bishop Sibour, and many others of the same stripe.

One that she did continue to acknowledge in later years was a naive little ode to the swallows, the pleasant sort of verse a young girl might compose when not busy with her lacework:

*Hirondelle aux yeux noir, hirondelle, je t'aime.*

*Je ne sais quel écho par toi m'est apporté*

*Des rivages lointains: pour vivre, loi suprême,*

*Il me faut comme à toi, l'air et la liberté.*<sup>28</sup>

Ravens and wolves were also part of her bestiary. Ravens, which feed on carrion, were less pleasant than swallows, but they were "pure" and they too brought "liberty."<sup>29</sup>

She followed this theme of liberty through history. It was the story of Marcus Curtius (these French republicans knew their Roman history very well), the patrician who leapt fully armed and on horseback into a chasm with the cry, "Long live the Republic!"<sup>\* 30</sup>

It was the story of Rouget de Lisle:<sup>\*\*</sup>

*Cette voix, c'est la Marseillaise,*

*Bouche d'airain, souffle de feu,*

*La Révolution française*

*Qui frémit et gronde en tout lieu.*<sup>31</sup>

And above all, it was Saint-Just:

*Ombre d'un citoyen, Saint-Just, je te salue.*

*Viens, frère, parle-moi. L'heure est-elle venue?*

*Les Pharaons vont-ils tomber?*

Liberty and honour had disappeared. This "ardent people" had taken an adventurer as their master. All was quiet, all kept quiet, yet she could see the marching cohorts of revolutionaries gathering in the shadows. And one of them held out to her "his pale hands":

*Tous deux nous paraissions à peu près du même âge,*

*Et soit que ce fut l'âme, ou l'air, ou le visage,*

*Ses traits étaient pareils aux miens...*

And Saint-Just asked her:

*Entends-tu dans la nuit cette voix qui t'appelle,*

*Ecoute, l'heure sonne, viens...*<sup>32</sup>

This kindred soul, this brother, this lover for whom Louise

\* according to legend, a chasm opened up in the Forum in 362 B.C. It would not close, said the seers, until Rome's most precious possession had been thrown into it. Curtius, reasoning that "nothing is more precious than a brave citizen," threw himself in, and the gulf promptly closed

\*\* Claude Joseph Rouget de Lisle (1760 - 1836): French army officer and author of the "Marseillaise" — *transl. notes*

yearned, could not be the good bourgeois of Haute-Marne who had earlier asked her hand in marriage, or the officer who later risked the same question (she apparently replied that she had sworn never to marry but, sacrifice for sacrifice, she would indeed marry him as soon as he had killed the Emperor<sup>33</sup>), or even Hugo himself. She thought, however, that she had been granted a glimpse of this elusive worthy lover in a sort of premonition, and so she awaited his arrival. Who would be her own Saint-Just? She still didn't know, but it was inevitable that she would discover him one day, cause him to be born, invent him.

For Louise, the revolution was not simply memories of the past. It was a universal and continuous source of action. Slaves rebelled in the United States, and she wrote, "Les Noirs devant le gibet de John Brown":

*Frères, il est donc vrai, la guerre est déclarée,  
Venez... 34*

Italy was in turmoil; she wrote "A Garibaldi."<sup>35</sup> Poland crushed, she wrote "Serment au Peuple." As long as her voice could last, "may she cry to you, O Liberty."<sup>36</sup>

But misery was right here as well, on our own doorstep, and we knew nothing of it: "Les Ouvriers de Rouen."<sup>37</sup> Criminals strike, but "we let the victims die." What had become of the word "fraternity"? A year ago, we didn't know the workers were dying of hunger in Rouen, but now we knew. She described the children searching for food in the frozen fields, dying of cold and hunger as they scabbled the earth. Louise could never ignore such suffering. Just as in Vroncourt, she now called not for the distant Revolution, but for immediate charity:

*Donnons sans balancer, donnons jusqu'à nos âmes,  
...on tue en hésitant.*

And there was misery in Paris itself. She wrote in "Les Misères"<sup>38</sup> of the old people "who have no hope and no home," of the scarecrow woman in the doorway, scavenging garbage that a dog would refuse (the prostitution theme):

*... Oh, n'est-il donc personne  
Qui s'en aille sans cesse, et la nuit, et le jour,  
A l'heure où paraît l'aube, à l'heure où minuit sonne,  
Relevant, consolant le pauvre avec amour...*

But alms alone cannot counter famine, war, plague, the eternal scourges of mankind. There must be fraternity among all men:



*Que sont tous ces palais élevés sur les sables?  
Pourquoi ces hautes tours à des Babels semblables?  
Hommes, aimons l'humanité...*

Louise continued to send verses to the great poet who, from his rock,\* ceaselessly raged against Little Napoleon:

*Voyez-vous dans la brume un rocher couvert d'ombre,  
C'est là qu'est le maître exilé,  
Mais par lui, dans la nuit, des visions sans nombre  
Montrent l'avenir étoilé.*<sup>39</sup>

For Victor Hugo, in the eyes of all republicans, was the living symbol of resistance to the Empire.

While he received many of her poems, most of them went elsewhere and *those* verses, she tells us, were "undoubtedly the best, for they were full of anger and indignation. They probably ended up in M. Bonaparte's wastebaskets... The curses that I have sent him!"<sup>40</sup> For example, this "Marseillaise Noire" which she threw into the Imperial letterbox on July 14. I found a draft copy among her personal papers:<sup>41</sup>

*La nuit est courte et fugitive.  
En avant, tenons-nous les mains,  
Garde à toi, citoyen! Qui vive?  
Républicain, Républicain...*

And then, there was this song to Mme Bonaparte, a collective composition by Louise, Vermorel and some others, which consisted of a litany of insults, put to the tune of the familiar "Marlborough":

*Gueuses, Robert-Macaire,\*\*  
Mironton (etc.),  
Vendus et tripoteurs...*<sup>42</sup>

By now, you understand, Louise had forgotten all about her petition on behalf of Orsini...

In the midst of all this constant exaltation and high tension, the climate in which she best liked to live, Louise still found time for moments of relaxation. Above all, music. While still assistant-schoolmistress to Mme Vollier, she had sung in church, and the organ and choir gave her "the sensation of angels' wings beating in the nave."<sup>43</sup>

But after those angels came the demons. Louise wrote "Un Rêve des sabbats" one Sunday afternoon, giving her imagina-

\* Hugo was still in exile in the Channel Islands.

\*\* Robert-Macaire was the archetypal highwayman, from *L'Auberge des Adrets* — transl. notes

tion free rein since she knew this opera (words and music) would never see the light of day. It was as romance as Louise herself. It had a bleak setting: Satan atop a Paris church, the rest of the city engulfed in lava. Satan and Don Juan had fallen in love with the same "druidess" and their rivalry set off an apocalyptic war. One after another, all of Louise's favourite characters from history, literature and legend made their appearances on stage. The war ended with the destruction of the world and the return of the "spirits" to the elemental forces of nature, whose chorus could be heard through the deep night, lit only by sudden flashes of lightning. The infernal beat of the orchestra died away; one after another, the instruments fell silent. A harp shivered its last notes into the silence. Louise threw every possible instrument into her imaginary orchestra: harps, lyres, flutes, bugles, guitars, a harmonica and even a cannon. And she saw her gigantic orchestra playing in the folds of a mountain range, with the audience gathered in the valley below.

The grandmother of one of her students, who happened to arrive in the midst of all this, was appalled by the deliberate cacophony: "The worst of it is, some of this is very well done," she said. "But you can only permit yourself such fantasies if you're rich and famous." Replied Louise, "Then I'll remain a schoolteacher..."<sup>44</sup>

Short annual vacations took her to Haute-Marne, to her mother and grandmother, who were delighted to have a visit from the prodigal daughter. In 1864, Louise used her holiday-time to take up cudgels on behalf of a family by the name of Bonnet, from Varennes-sur-Amance, which couldn't afford to press its claim to an inheritance. She wrote a lawyer, asking that he take up the case: "Would you please put your wonderful talents at the service of these unfortunate people?" She then sent him all the necessary documentation. "Justice for this family will enrich the whole country, and the whole country will thank you for your efforts."<sup>45</sup>

The following year, she brought with her a young girl of sixteen or seventeen years of age, Victorine Louvet, who was then preparing for her school examinations. (She later married Eudes, a Blanquist, and fought for the Commune against Versailles.) Louise took Victorine for a walk in the woods, showed her the old chateau and the sacred "Oak of the Oaths." One day, in the Thal forest, a wolf followed them during their

entire walk — real wolf, imaginary wolf, with Louise one doesn't know and it doesn't matter, the wolf was always an important member of her bestiary. Whatever he was, this primordial wolf inspired her to compose the "Légende du chêne" for the fascinated Victorine. A druidess (yet again),

*Debout sous le grand chêne  
Sous le grand chêne de trente ans.  
Des rameaux de rouge verveine  
Enlacent ses cheveux flottants.*

The bards sang, the wise men of the tribe "spread their sacred cloths"; a white bull, sacrificed, died with a groan. This was a sinister omen: the gods then demanded human sacrifice, voluntary sacrifice, such as that once made by the patrician Curtius. The martyr theme:

*Qui donc te fit, ô mort sanglante,  
Mort des martyrs, le plus beau sort...*

The druidess tapped with her golden rod a handsome youth, who offered himself to the slaughter, and then killed herself.<sup>46</sup>

Legendary Gaul, the Gaul of little shaggy men who dared resist Caesar's might, was another of Louise's favourite themes<sup>47</sup>...along with storms, winds, oceans, wolves, combat, tempest, martyrdom and other such cataclysms. But her "asterix complex" brought her full circle, back to her own day and the Caesar then reigning over France:

*O nos pères, fiers et sauvages  
Bien lourd est donc votre sommeil,  
Pères, n'est-il plus de présages,  
N'avons-nous plus de sang vermeil?*<sup>48</sup>

In the ancient forests, on the pathways of Vercingetorix,\* Louise pursued a single dream: the war of the weak against the strong, the poor against the rich, the powerless against the powerful. This war, which she found among the pavingstones of her own Paris as well as in the timeless forests of Lorraine, was to lead, eventually, to a dazzling future of love and peace among truly fraternal human beings.

What turned Louise into a revolutionary and, despite her childhood religious devotion, a materialist and atheist? Long mutations of this sort are hard to trace, and her *Mémoires* offer

\* Gaulish chieftain and leader of the unsuccessful revolt in 52 B.C. against Caesar's Roman troops; taken to Rome and put to death, 46 B.C. — *transl. note*

us no dependable help in the search. Louise, as we've already noted, insisted that she was republican and revolutionary right from childhood, conveniently ignoring the years of her Catholic, royalist and Bonapartist poetry. So we must discount her testimony.

For example, her 1858 petition to Napoleon III on behalf of Orsini contained prayers for his dynasty and used the imagery of Catholic mythology (angels). In 1861, she was still spiritualist, in Hugo's style, when she wrote *Plus d'idiots, plus de fous*. Was she ever a true believer of the Catholic faith? It really seems that, for her, it was largely a matter of emotions and aesthetics. When she sang in church, she was transported by the incense, the candles and the sacred music of the *Tantum Ergo* or the *Regina Coeli*. And then, "there was a long period of time when I no longer believed, or was at least aware that those who doubt no longer believe."<sup>49</sup>

She began to take the courses being offered working people on Rue Hautefeuille by republicans such as Jule Favre (whom she loved "like a father") and Eugène Pelletan, to whom she sent her enormous manuscript, *La Sagesse d'un fou*. He even managed to wade through it, and then wrote in the margin, "No, not the wisdom of a fool; some day it will be the wisdom of the people."<sup>50</sup>

She was greatly influenced by Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and Claude Bernard's *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*. Young (female) teachers flocked to these course, "avid for the knowledge which women may acquire only by stealth." They seized "these scraps of science and liberty... We were possessed by a rage for knowledge." They studied physics, chemistry, law and stenography (which was then relatively unknown). A few young women "rather half-heartedly," prepared for the baccalaureate examination which had just been opened up to them by the pioneering efforts of Julie Daubié. A recent and decidedly incomplete victory: the minister of Public Instruction had refused to award Julie the diploma to which she was entitled, for fear, poor man, of making his ministry ridiculous in the eyes of the (male) world. Louise began to study mathematics once again, and rediscovered her passion for algebra.<sup>51</sup> "I'm working toward my baccalaureate," she wrote the worthy M. Fayet, "and I'm composing romances, songs and music as well. You can see that I practise every folly."<sup>52</sup>

Happy and free to pursue their interests in their little world on Rue Hautefeuille, the young women seemed more like students themselves than the teachers that they were. Walking home from her courses late in the evening, Louise discovered a new scope for her love of practical jokes. Dressed in a long black cloak, a hat which hid her face and "new" boots from the Marché du Temple which made a great clatter on the pavement, she'd pick out some good bourgeois citizen and follow him down the street. In this ill-famed Paris of the Second Empire, he was sure to mistake her for a roving cut-throat...<sup>53</sup>

One of the teachers on Rue Hautefeuille was a M. Francolin (nicknamed "Dr. Francolinus" by the students, who thought he looked like an alchemist of old). He chaired the Society for Elementary Education, and took a few of these teachers, Louise obviously among them, to the vocational school run by the Society on Rue Thévenot.<sup>54</sup> There the teachers, who themselves were receiving instruction on Rue Hautefeuille, turned around and offered it to others. Louise and Charles de Sivry (first friend and then brother-in-law to Verlaine\*) taught drawing, literature and ancient geography. She became a student of Transformism, and took to describing the birth, youth and aging of cities and peoples as being "just like the life cycle of each individual human being and the human race as a whole."<sup>55</sup>

The Rue Thévenot school also brought together the Women's Rights group, which was run by Mmes Jules Simon, André Léo and Maria Deraismes. Women's Rights demanded equal education for both sexes (an old cry) and adequate salaries for women so as to eliminate the necessity of prostitution.<sup>56</sup> Louise was at first shy, but then won Mme Jules Simon's approval with her sweetness. She was asked to give talks in every district of the city on employment for women. "It's not much, but it's the only help I can offer."<sup>57</sup>

As well, Louise threw herself into the Second Empire's great quarrel about the role of women. On one side: the eternal anti-feminists, represented at this moment in history by Michelet, Emile de Girardin and, above all, Proudhon, who offered women nothing more than the celebrated choice between "housewife and courtesan" and who had such an unfortunate

\* Paul Verlaine (1849 - 1906): French poet generally considered to be part of the Symbolist movement, though his own position on Symbolism was equivocal  
— *transl. note*

influence on the French labour movement. On the other side: Jenny d'Héricourt (who wrote *La Femme affranchie* in 1860), Juliette Lamber (*Idées antiproudhoniennes sur l'amour, les femmes et le mariage*, 1861), André Léo who, widowed, had to support her two children with her pen (*Les Femmes et les mœurs*) and Maria Deraismes, whose calm and measured talks forced many a misogynist to admit that an intelligent, cultivated and even well-bred young lady could indeed speak in public without utterly dishonouring herself.<sup>58</sup>

In 1861, Louise Michel published a reply to a certain "Junius" who, in *Le Figaro*, had taken a stand against women authors. Junius spoke in the name of "men of letters"; Louise replied in the name of "women of letters." She pointed to *Soeur de Charité*, the paper run by Adèle Esquiros, which had as its sole aim to serve justice and truth. Was that goal to be denied to women? "As far as this obscure bluestocking is concerned, I have never felt and have never known other female authors to feel anything but a keen desire to be useful." She criticized Michelet for reducing woman to her garden and her home where, the eternal child eternally frail, she was to spend her time being protected and cared for. "Fine gentlemen make of their wives an idol — and it's a poor enough idol, for the husband creates this idol in his own miserable image." According to Junius, men now regretted that they had ever allowed women to learn to read. "Well, I regret that those who think themselves strong attack those whom they think weak." But at least, let them make it open war, "let them stop fencing." <sup>59</sup>

Eight years later, Louise, who was demonstrably the most devoted of them all to the cause, became the secretary of the Democratic Society for Moralization. The society's goals were nothing short of revolutionary: it wanted to help make it possible for female workers to earn living wages. Accordingly, the members sought bread first but work right after, for "alms degrade, work ennobles." The society was not a normal commercial placement agency: every position was arranged free of charge. "We count on you, all you who do not wish the worker's daughter to submit to shame... May the People triumph!" Charter members of the society included, among others, other..... and Adèle Esquiros.<sup>60</sup>

It would appear that Louise at this time was attracted not only to republicans like Jules Favre and Pelletan and to the

respectable women of Women's Rights, but to the International and the Blanquists as well. She may even have become a member of the International: she claimed as much before the Council of War but we must be wary of her testimony, for she was using that forum to accuse herself of every "sin" in the book. On the other hand, she does describe, with an intensity that suggests she knew it personally, the dusty stairway of the Corderie du Temple, where the International used to meet. It was, she said, like mounting the steps of a temple, "the temple of a free and peaceful world."<sup>61</sup>

She followed passionately every portent of the Empire's impending doom and attended a ceaseless round of meetings. The members of the Free Thought group met in a little jerry-built sort of hall, known as the Salle de la Marseillaise. There they talked about religion very little, but a great deal about the coming revolution. One day, a woman who was unknown to the group rose solemnly to announce, "If the men hang back when the time comes, women will lead the way. And I'll be there." People smirked. The woman was Louise Michel.<sup>62</sup>

There were meetings outside the city as well. "The things we said as we walked home through the fields. Oh, those were happy times!"<sup>63</sup> (Happy times indeed. For those rural paths are now buried beneath concrete and asphalt, and as for those untarnished hopes for the revolution...)

Marianne came to live with her daughter in Paris after the death of her own mother, Marguerite.<sup>64</sup> She worried a great deal about the turn which Louise's life seemed to have taken. Louise kept trying to calm her, insisting that she wasn't involved in anything at all. One evening, two comrades came to call for her, but waited outside. "You can't possibly be going out to give lessons at this time of night," protested Marianne. "Julie has sent for me." Marianne went to the window. "I knew it. It's your meetings again."<sup>65</sup>

The political situation nearly exploded when the journalist Victor Noir was assassinated by Pierre Bonaparte, a cousin of the Emperor. The Blanquists and the Montmartre revolutionaries went armed to the funeral. Louise had taken a sabre from her uncle in Lagny and, "dreaming of Harmodius,"\* dressed in man's garb "in order neither to embarrass others nor to be

\* an Athenian (d. 514 B.C.) who conspired against the tyrant Hippias — *transl. note*

embarrassed myself." They were sure the triumph of the long-sought Republic was imminent. But instead, the wisdom of the old republican Delescluze and the prudence of Rochefort\* carried the day. The body of the Empire's latest victim was taken directly to the cemetery and the huge would-be funeral procession broke up, with only a few minor incidents. Varlin congratulated Delescluze and Rochefort for not having risked provoking a massacre. But the Blanquists and Louise Michel went home slump-shouldered in dejection.<sup>66</sup>

Louise sent Léon Richier (editor of the paper, *Société du droit des femmes*) a number of articles on "women's rights," for women were demanding their right (and duty) "to take part in the country's period of mourning." These articles amounted to a solemn oath: a group of *citoyennes*, "of whom I have the honour to be one," had sworn on the tomb of Victor Noir "to wear mourning for the victim until justice be done." And indeed, for the rest of her life Louise never wore anything but black, since the dead of the Commune quickly succeeded the victims of the Empire. To this oath she attached two pieces of verse, entitled "Les Corbeaux" and "Le Champ de bataille," which she acknowledged having borrowed from Hugo. However, "the great poet is not one to take offence at trivial matters, or to fear a woman's rivalry."<sup>67</sup>

Victor Noir's death inspired her to other furious poems as well:

*Bandits, êtres crépusculaires,  
Mouchards, flibustiers, assassins  
Passez sans vous laver les mains,  
Fortifiez bien tous vos repaires...*

\* Henri Rochefort, or, the Marquis Henri de Rochefort-Lucçay (1831 - 1913): impoverished nobleman turned radical extremist turned nationalist; a journalist, satirist, "muckraker" and, briefly, member of the Chamber of Deputies (under the Empire). His stormy career spanned the equally stormy years from the Second Empire to the First World War. As a young man, his concept of patriotism embraced republicanism, socialism and nationalism. As the years passed, however, he increasingly paid lip service to the first, and dropped the second in favour of the more bigoted variety of the third — he was closely identified, for example, with the Boulangist movement and, later, with the anti-Dreyfusards. His newspapers — most importantly, *L'Intransigeant* — veered with him. Yet he was also witty, charming, outspokenly contemptuous of authority all his life, the father of a long-lasting style of political journalism and, as we shall see, financially generous to Louise Michel to the day she died, even though she refused ever to endorse his later political stands — *Transl. note*



*Entassez bien crime sur crime.  
Nous sommes là, nolis les vengeurs,  
Nous maudissons les oppresseurs  
Sur la tombe de la victime.<sup>68</sup>*

Her curses notwithstanding, the Empire continued to reign.

## IV - PARIS IS COLD, PARIS IS HUNGRY

The declaration of war by Napoleon III on Prussia (July 19, 1870) sharply divided public opinion. The army was ready "down to the last gaiter button,"\* after all, so the war would be a mere — and brief — formality. The jingoistic Parisian crowds shouted "To Berlin!" and labelled everybody a traitor who disagreed. Rochefort's paper, *La Marseillaise*, opposed this storm of emotion, and had its presses smashed.<sup>1</sup> The French section of the International published an appeal to German workers: "Brothers of Germany, in the name of peace, do not listen to the vested interests and the lackeys who try to mislead you as to the true spirit of France... Divisions between us can only lead to the final triumph of despotism on both sides of the Rhine." Processions of students, Blanquists and Internationalists took to the streets to proclaim their opposition to the war, where they were promptly clubbed by the police. Louise went home from one such demonstration to write an anguished poem:

*Dans la nuit, on s'en va, marchant en longues files,  
Le long des boulevards, disant la paix! la paix!  
Et l'on se sent suivi par la meute servile,  
Ton jour, ô liberté, ne viendra-t-il jamais?*

She accused Napoleon III of having declared war just to ensure his own dynastic survival:

\* the famous — and false — boast made at the opening of the war by Marshal Leboeuf, then minister of War. Napoleon III was less starry-eyed: he went to the Front and promptly telegraphed his wife, "Nothing is ready." — *transl. note*

*Pour retarder un peu sa chute qui s'avance  
Il lui faut des combats, dût la France y sombrer...*

And then, sound prophet, she predicted the fall of the regime:

*Maudit, de ton palais, sens-tu passer ces hommes?  
C'est ta fin...*

Let the tyrant "draw his sword," let him drive the people as sheep "to the slaughter"; he would still fall. And, supporting the International's appeal for worker solidarity, she threw out her own challenge:

*Puisqu'on veut le combat, puisque l'on veut la guerre,  
Peuples, le front courbé, plus tristes que la mort  
C'est contre les tyrans qu'ensemble, il faut la faire.  
Bonaparte et Guillaume auront le même sort.*<sup>2</sup>

It quickly became obvious that the men who had so ardently called for this war were incapable of waging it. French defeats followed one another in close succession: Froeschwiller and Woerth (August 6), Borny (August 14), Gravelotte (August 16), Saint-Privat (August 18). By August 14, the Blanquists believed the time was ripe to overthrow the Empire and so they tried to seize the La Villette barracks and its weapons. Utter failure. There was a demonstration the next day and Louise, of course, was there:

*Nous disions: "En avant! Vive la République!"  
Tout Paris répondra, tout Paris soulevé,  
Se souvenant enfin. Paris fier, héroïque  
Dans son sang généreux de l'Empire lavé,  
Voilà ce qu'on croyait; la ville fut muette...*<sup>3</sup>

Blanqui had managed to flee to Belgium, but Eudes and Brideau were arrested and subsequently sentenced to death by a Council of War. Michelet circulated a petition on their behalf, which was soon covered with signatures. Louise was one of those collecting names for it. Some of the more timid signatories tried subsequently to withdraw their names, but Louise refused to allow such cowardice.

Louise, Adèle Esquiros and André Léo were chosen to carry the petition to the governor of Paris, General Trochu, on the theory that a trio of women might have more impact. Especially *this* trio... They stormed their way into an antechamber, where they seated themselves upon a bench to await developments. "They thought they could simply ease us out the door!" Which only shows how little their adversaries knew the women who

confronted them and declared, with more than a hint of revolutionary jargon, that they had come "on behalf of the people" and that they were charged with placing the dossier in the hands of General Trochu himself. Finally, a man appeared who claimed to be the general's secretary, empowered to represent him in his absence. The three women finally agreed to hand over the petition to him, on condition that he officially sign for it.<sup>4</sup> For Louise, this was only an opening skirmish with authority, but still one which had them "in fear of execution." The sought-after reprieve was granted, and signed on the very day of the French defeat at Sudan. Two days later, on September 4, the accumulated skein of military disasters finally toppled the Empire.

In the heady days which followed, Victor Hugo came home in triumph from exile. Louise Michel went to see him, this poet to whom she had so regularly sent her verses, the man whom long ago, in Vroncourt, she had claimed as a "kindred soul." Hugo's *Carnets intimes* for September 13 and 18 recorded visits by Louise Michel, adding the enigmatic code-letter "n" and the sentence, "an hour's ride with Enjolras, two francs fifty." This might mean the resumption of the sexual relations which had (perhaps) begun in 1851, or the first, furtive caresses between the poet and the fortyish spinster,<sup>5</sup> or even her refusal: instead of "nude" (as M. Guillemin\* believes), the letter "n" might have meant "no." Personally, I favour this last hypothesis, for I came across a message from Louise to Hugo, scribbled hastily in pencil and undated: "Dear Master, Enjolras begs your forgiveness for his rudeness both yesterday and today. But I can still send you a letter, anyone has that right, I as much as another citizen. Master, are you very angry with me? Enjolras."<sup>6</sup> But then, this little spat could have been caused by a number of other things as well. We shall probably never know the truth of the relations between Louise and Hugo. We do know, however, that their correspondence continued without interruption until 1880.

Meanwhile, the war continued, history continued, and those events pushed Louise's sentimental life well into the background — a life which, in any event, she took great pains to conceal and which therefore poses such a challenge for the conscientious biographer.

Louise exulted at the end of Empire:

\* see transl. note p. 28

*Amis, l'on a la République.  
Le sombre passé va finir.  
Debout tous, c'est l'heure héroïque  
Fort est celui qui sait mourir.*<sup>7</sup>

Again, the theme of martyrdom. However, the day on which Jules Favre embraced Louise Michel, Théophile Ferré and Rigault on the steps of City Hall, calling them all his "dear children,"<sup>8</sup> was also a day of hope that all those who had yearned for the Republic during the years of Empire would now unite in one common endeavour.

However, it was soon obvious that this was not to happen. The men who took power on September 4 belonged to the bourgeoisie, and found themselves caught between two equally formidable enemies: on one side, the Prussians and, on the other, the Paris workers who wanted not just the outer form of republic but its true, social content as well.

Strasbourg had been under siege since August 13 and, on August 18, was still holding out. A few women — and one can safely guess that Louise Michel was their "ringleader"\* — decided to demand weapons at City Hall and then to try to break out of Paris, reach Strasbourg and either help defend her or die in the attempt. The idea was probably pure madness. In any event, it was dismissed as such by the politicians and the military, who seemed to wear their defeats very lightly indeed.

But the women persevered. A small group headed for City Hall, crying "To Strasbourg!" They were joined along the way by young people (mostly students) and other women (mostly teachers). They gathered at the feet of the Strasbourg statue, opened a register and invited people to sign up. They then sent André Léo and Louise Michel to City Hall, to demand weapons for their volunteers. The women were politely received and then shut up in a small room which already held two other prisoners: one a student and the other an old woman, who had gone to the grocer's for some oil and hadn't the slightest idea what "crime" she was supposed to have committed. Some three or four hours later, a colonel — "Regular and stupid features, square shoulders, square body, a shining example of a colonel" — came to interrogate them. Louise Michel and André Léo refused to answer any questions until the old woman had been freed.

\* let us note, however, that experts agree ringleaders can only succeed to the extent they express and channel the common will — *author's note*

The Colonel couldn't make head nor tail of this business of volunteers and weapons for Strasbourg: "What do you care if Strasbourg falls? *You* aren't there..." Finally, a member of the government appeared on the scene, and had the student and the two women released.<sup>9</sup>

But there continued to be daily demonstrations before the statue, for Strasbourg was dear to the Parisian heart. On October 2, Louise called on the city's nurses and the female members of the Free Thought group to go once again to the Strasbourg statue and from there to City Hall. This time, however, they wouldn't demand arms but would merely express the hope that the French armies then being formed in the provinces would be marched as quickly as possible to Strasbourg in an effort to relieve the city.<sup>10</sup> Were these two demonstrations in fact one and the same? If so, Louise Michel was mistaken about the date, which is not very important, but about the purpose of the demonstration as well, and was guilty of dramatizing it in her usual fashion. It is much more touching to demand arms and a chance to "get through" than simply to ask that an army be dispatched to the beleaguered city.

In Paris, which had itself been under siege since September 19, Louise practised her marksmanship out at the fairgrounds. She became quite an accomplished shot, as was to be demonstrated later on.<sup>11</sup> But she didn't spend all her time with a rifle. Her life, as usual, raced on in a multitude of directions at once.

She continued as best she could to take care of her students on Rue Oudot. There were now some two hundred girls, between the ages of six and twelve, whom Louise Michel instructed with the help of an assistant schoolmistress, Malvina Poulain. The school also served as an asylum for children from three to six years of age, whose parents had come as refugees from the countryside to Paris before Paris itself had fallen under siege. Marianne Michel took care of the littlest ones, with the help of the "big girls" of twelve. Louise Michel's school made solidarity a matter of practice rather than theory.

But the first requirement was to feed all these children, and during the siege, this meant constant struggle. The mayor of Montmartre, Clemenceau, could at first make sure that they had milk, vegetables, horsemeat and often even sweets.<sup>12</sup> Later, though, in the dead of winter, they were reduced to weekly rations of eight pounds of bread per fifty children and

some vermicelli, lard and other oddments with which to eke out meagre horsemeat stews.<sup>13</sup> Many children died of cold and hunger during that winter of siege but, thanks to Clemenceau, the children in Louise's asylum remained relatively privileged.

The mayor of Montmartre and Louise Michel had more in common than this impulse for charity and mutual assistance. Clemenceau had sent a directive to all the schools in his arrondissement which separated church from state and in effect created secular schools: the children were free to attend catechism, but the teachers were no longer obliged to take them to it. Louise, who welcomed this measure enthusiastically, was the only one in all Montmartre to obey it.<sup>14</sup> One must add, however, that during her frequent absences from the school Marianne and Malvina Poulain would promptly restore the traditional religious practices.

Louise had become furiously anticlerical. She sent the paper *La Marseillaise* a letter denouncing religious workhouses "which starve the families" and religious schools, which were open only to the children of the bourgeoisie. She could provide, she claimed, "a list of unhappy children whose parents have given up the fight to win admittance for them to the nuns' asylums or schools." The nuns rejected the children of the people? "So much the better. It is time these daughters of Torquemada\* disappear." For everything in France was in flux, and charity would be replaced with fraternity. "Fraternity will mean democratic schools for all children and work for every family."<sup>15</sup>

The misery of this cruel winter placed more demands on Louise's charity than she could possibly meet. One day, Georges Clemenceau saw a certain man hunched over a bowl of soup at her place and murmured discreetly, "Do you realize that this man is a known thief?" "Well," she replied, "he's still hungry."<sup>16</sup>

This was entirely characteristic of her. Mme Paul Meurice once noticed that Louise had nothing more on her bed than a thin horse-blanket. She told Victor Hugo about it, who sent Louise some money with which to purchase a warmer cover, but Louise instead spent the money on someone else. Hugo offered to replace the money, on condition that she this time spend it on herself. "Then keep your money, because I won't keep the

\* Tomas de Torquemada (1410 - 98) was the Spanish inquisitor-general  
— transl. note

promise.”<sup>17</sup> Respectable people were of the opinion that she “wasted” money. “But I hear the cries from below,” she explained to Hugo, in terms worthy of the master himself.

She found rooms and mattresses for people who had been bombed out of their homes. But how was she to feed them? Some women volunteered to work on the ambulances. But how could she find work for the rest? Couldn’t Hugo publish in *Le Rappel* an appeal “for help from the members of the former Committee of Moralization Through Work,” an appeal to “those devoted women, that they might help us find work”?

For the most part, though, she thought the women lacked as much common sense as the men did courage. She ridiculed their simperings: “Oh! You’re so tall! I have such confidence in you!”

The war surrounded them: from Saint-Denis you could hear the cannon booming. Louise kept one ear cocked, for she had promised to join a certain old woman at the La Chapelle depot should anything happen. Enjolras sent her “dear Master” this probably quite accurate self-judgment: “It’s not heroism, I assure you. I just love danger! Perhaps that’s the savage in me.”<sup>18</sup>

Whatever Louise might write to Hugo (in a very feminine effort to boost her own stock at the expense of the others), women did play a solid part in the defence of Paris. The good bourgeois ladies formed an Aid Society for the Victims of War, under the direction of Mme Jules Simon. Louise herself paid them tribute: “The members of the National Defence did very little defending, but their wives were heroic.”<sup>19</sup> Other women signed on as ambulance nurses, as canteen workers, and tried generally to alleviate first scarcity and then outright famine. Nathalie Lemel and her food co-operative *La Marmite* managed to feed hundreds of starving Parisians.<sup>20</sup> Louise personally asked her friend Benoit Malon, who worked in the town hall of the eighteenth arrondissement, to slip a particular bakery worker a bit of beef or horsemeat, “for his chest is so weak.”<sup>21</sup>

To feed the hungry, clothe the freezing, care for the wounded, is all part of the great tradition of charity, and traditionally a role assumed by women. From here on, however, Louise Michel chose a second path as well. Charity was a necessary and immediate palliative, but no more than that, and it needed to be surpassed and then filed away in history’s archives. Louise now whole-heartedly joined the Parisian



masses in their choice of the historical path of revolt and social justice.

Blanquists, Internationalists and other "anonymous enthusiasts"<sup>22</sup> led the formation of a Central Committee of the Republican Federation of the National Guard, and of a Committee of the Twenty Arrondissements, which represented the district-level committees. Louise Michel belonged to both the women's and the men's Vigilance Committees of the eighteenth arrondissement. The former, with such stalwarts as Mme Poirier, Béatrix Excoffon and old Mme Blin, was responsible for distributing work, channelling assistance, visiting the poor and the sick, and providing home-care for them. But the committee also had its political side, though Mme Poirier, who leaves us this information, concealed it from the Council of War.<sup>23</sup>

The men's Vigilance Committee was primarily political and revolutionary. "Those who joined it were absolutely devoted to the Revolution." Woman though she was, this was where Louise felt truly at home. Moreover, "they didn't define your duty according to your sex. That stupid question was finally done with... I have never seen such true, clear, good minds at work. It was an amazing group: sound people, every one of them, not a weakling among them."<sup>24</sup>

And here, among these "distinguished" individuals, Louise finally found her Saint-Just, her kindred soul, her pure and fierce alter-ego, the man she had so long awaited, the one whose face she had conjured up during the darkness of Empire, the one who had murmured to her:

*Ecoute, l'heure sonne, viens...*

This man, this Saint-Just reborn, was the Blanquist Théophile Ferré. She had first met him in the Montmartre cemetery during the days of Empire, at a memorial service for Murger (tombs and cemeteries played a prominent role in the life of Louise Michel).<sup>25</sup> Ferré was born in Paris on May 6, 1846, and was thus much younger than Louise, who was born in 1830, though she always gave her birthdate as 1836. Despite her singular lack of coquetry, Louise seemed to feel a need to drop her age closer to that of the young men who were her comrades, rather than let herself be known for a woman in her forties — which, at the time, was considered quite old. This feminine deception of hers looks to me like yet another indication of her love for Ferré.

Théophile Ferré, a modest accountant by occupation, was anything but modest in his revolutionary passion and boldness. In 1868, for example, he closed a commemorative speech at the tomb of Baudin (who had died on the barricades in 1851) with the provocative words: "Long live the Republic, the Convention in the Tuileries and Reason in Notre-Dame."\* He had already been convicted four times for political offences. He was one of the Blanquist defendants at the trial held in Blois (July-August 1870) and was acquitted for lack of proof, but then expelled from the High Court for creating a disturbance.<sup>26</sup> In short, he was just the revolutionary hero for Louise. She was already friendly with his sister Marie, a time-honoured way to approach the brother.<sup>27</sup>

Handsome? No, certainly not. He was very short, as we are told both by Clère (who despised the Communards) and by Vuillaume (who was himself a Communard). He had a black beard which "overran" his face (since 1848, the beard had been a sign of republican sympathies), a hooked nose, very black eyes (as far as Clère was concerned, all this black of beard and eye suggested a corresponding blackness of soul), but "very gentle eyes, which gleamed behind his pince-nez with unusual intensity" (adds Vuillaume). Clère took pains to describe Ferré's grating voice: when he spoke, "he balanced on the tips of his toes" (a habit with many short men) and "crowed like a shrill and angry rooster."<sup>28</sup> Unkind, perhaps, but apparently true. Ferré himself, in a short note written at the age of sixteen, stressed all his failings: his shortness, his long nose (which later earned him the nicknames of Fée Carabosse,\*\* Maréchal Nez\*\*\*) and the rest. He added: "My thoughts are unusual for young men of my age. I want to appear serious and austere, and that simply doesn't go with my comic appearance. Courage, my poor friend..."<sup>29</sup>

But his physical appearance doesn't matter. What does matter is what Louise saw in him, and that was, the perfect revolutionary. She adored him and, though she never comments

\* triply provocative, since it called for: first, the Republic, though Napoleon III ruled at the time; second, for the (National) Convention, i.e. the government of the French Revolution, to reign in the royal palace of the Tuileries; and third, for Reason, not God, to reign in the cathedral of Notre Dame

\*\* the traditional hag-like, wicked fairy of children's stories

\*\*\* lit. "Marshal Nose," a pun on Maréchal Ney, the famous French Marshal

— *transl. notes*

on this, she was widely assumed to be his mistress. During the Commune, apparently, there were portraits of Louise Michel on sale, with the caption, "Ferré's mistress." This is without any doubt untrue. This great passion by a plain spinster in her forties for a boy of twenty-five could only have been platonic. There is nothing on Ferré's side, in any event, to suggest that he loved "the great *citoyenne* as a woman; the letters he sent her could have been written to any comrade in the struggle.

The Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement offered Louise a passionate climate to match her own temperament, love mixed with revolution: "We felt free, able to look back without unduly imitating '93\* and forward without fear of the unknown." She spent every free moment at 41 de la Chaussée Clignancourt, the Committee's meeting-place. During that hard siege winter, they'd share one herring between them<sup>30</sup> and more frequently warm themselves "with the heat of ideas" than with wood or coal. Sometimes, to honour a guest, they would stoke the fireplace with a sacrificial chair or dictionary. Committee members usually arrived about five or six in the afternoon, to review that day's events and plan the next. Then, at eight o'clock, each member would leave for his own club. Ferré chaired the club which met in Salle Petot and Louise, the one which met at the Justice de Paix. These clubs were also known as Clubs of the Revolution, Grandes Carrières district, a turn of phrase which reminded the bourgeoisie unpleasantly of '93. Under the Government of National Defence, however, chairing a club brought the lively possibility of a prison cell rather than honour to the individual involved.

Louise kept a little pistol in her desk, which she'd flourish whenever the "respectable" National Guards, armed with rifles, turned up to disturb their meetings.<sup>31</sup> The people of Montmartre, mind you, returned the compliment by dropping into the "bourgeois" clubs, to spread their own brand of propaganda.

Louise not only endorsed such strong methods, she practised them herself. There weren't enough ambulances in Montmartre. Louise, with a young girl from the Society for Elementary Education in tow, decided to provide another one. No money? Not to worry, that could be arranged... And so the two women set out, flaunting their politics with their broad red

\* i.e. 1793, the Revolutionary Paris Commune — *transl. note*

sashes, to beg money from the churches. They chose a particularly vicious-looking member of the National Guard to accompany them, who rapped his gun on the church flagstones, just to get everyone's attention. He succeeded. The priests and the faithful, "pale with terror," promptly gave their widow's mite. The two women next went door-to-door, first visiting the financiers ("Jewish and Christian both") and then the "solid citizens" in general. The farcical aspect of this little adventure in terrorism didn't escape Louise, who displayed, then as always, her love for pranks. The expedition provoked gales of laughter down at the Montmartre town hall, though of course the delegates would have been most censorious had it been a failure.<sup>32</sup>

Paris, still besieged, suffered a terrible double blow when it learned on the same day of the capitulation of the French army at Metz (October 27) and the failure of the attempted sortie from Le Bourget. The Vigilance Committees organized a demonstration for the following day, October 31, in the square in front of City Hall. This time, they didn't cry, "Long live the Revolution!" as they had on September 4,\* but rather, "Long live the Commune!" Despite the demonstrator's hesitancy and differences of opinion, the government promised to hold municipal elections and even promised not to seek to manipulate them. (The latter promise, naturally enough, was not kept.) October 31, like every other day when Louise played an active role in something, inspired her to a poem:

*Le trente et un octobre sonne.  
Doublez vos gardes, Messieurs,  
La vile multitude tonne,  
Fermez vos portes aux vengeurs...*

*Vainqueurs, apportez vos trophées,  
Trochu, ses mystérieux plans,  
Favre, ses discours larmoyants,  
Bazaine, sa vaillante épée.*<sup>33</sup>

Louise escaped arrest that time but soon after (December 1, 1870) spent two days in jail for her part in a women's demonstration which, in fact, she had neither organized nor even encouraged. Louise, you see, didn't believe in staging limited demonstrations. When *she* rose up, "it [would] be with

\* date of the proclamation of the Third Republic, and formation of the provisional Government of National Defence — *transl. note*

the people, in arms." By now she was acquiring the reputation of being a ringleader. Ferré, Avronsart and Christ, in the name of the clubs, came to seek her release. (It must have pleased her that Ferré came to liberate her, just as, in her fairy tales in the Vroncourt days, the prince always came to free the prisoner.) Mme Paul Meurice, representing the Women's Society for the Victims of War, also interceded on her behalf, as did Victor Hugo, but by then she was already out of jail.<sup>34</sup>

Even though she spent more time with the men's Vigilance Committee than with the women's, Louise did address an appeal to the Montmartre *citoyennes*. It concerned organizing women into groups which could then be responsible for specific activities (much more administrative in nature than political). Starting with their own daily concerns was certainly an excellent way to groom women for political action. "When the homeland is in danger, one must sound the alarm wherever necessary, unmask cowardice wherever it might hide. Keep watch." Why were there so many drunken National Guards? Why couldn't the sick gain admittance to hospital? "Are there not some who linger unnecessarily, and so deprive the poor of hospital beds?" It was up to the women to keep an eye on such things. "Here, in Paris, we breathe the air of death. There is treachery afoot. Should Trochu follow Bazaine,\* the people must be roused. Keep watch!"<sup>35</sup>

She told Victor Hugo that she would shout aloud in public meetings: "If cowards betray the government, we'll summon our own resources and make our own desperate sortie from Paris. If enough of us take part, we'll route the enemy like a flock of sheep. If we are only a few, then we shall die, but others will follow our example and in death we shall light the lamps of liberty." She assured Hugo once again of her unbounded admiration: "As others fail, you appear all the greater."<sup>36</sup>

Her rage at these defeats, this encircling treason, found outlet in furious verse as well: *Les Vengeurs*. She attacked the "rabble" who slept, ate, drank as if nothing were happening, but she had complete confidence in the people (whom she distinguished from the rabble), the "terrible and great" revolutionary people.

\* i.e. betray the people: General Louis-Jules Trochu was both head of the Government of National Defence and military governor of Paris; Marshal François-Achille Bazaine was the marshal who had surrendered at Metz on October 27, 1870. See also transl. note p. 148 — *transl. note*

*Nous n'avons plus ni fils ni pères.  
 Haine, amour ont fui nos coeurs,  
 Devant nous, trêve à vos prières,  
 Nous sommes les sombres vengeurs.  
 Nous viendrons par les vastes plaines  
 Où l'herbe est verte sur les morts,  
 Par Strasbourg, par Metz, par les forts  
 Par l'Alsace et par la Lorraine...*

Make way for the people:

*Place! Voici quatre-vingt treize...*

and we shall "strike down both traitors and kings." Let them curse our memory in years to come:

*Aujourd'hui, chaque matin stoïque*

*Tient le feu purificateur...*

*Pour la tombe ou pour la victoire*

*Arborant ton rouge drapeau*

*O République pour ta gloire*

*Nous saurions rire sur l'échafaud...<sup>37</sup>*

In these verses, for which she was later condemned, Louise merely reflected the fury of the revolutionary people of Paris.

On January 7, 1871, the delegates of the Twenty Arrondissements, Ferré, Vaillant and Vallès, placarded the walls of Paris with a document now known as the Red Poster: "Has the government which, on September 4, assumed responsibility for national defence, fulfilled its mission? No." There were, in Paris, 500,000 fighters surrounded by only 200,000 Prussians. Yet, the republican government refused to arm the people, the republican government left the Bonapartists alone and jailed the republicans. The republican government had failed to govern, plan or fight. This regime, should it continue, could lead only to surrender. Would the people of Paris, the people of '89,\* await that surrender in "passive despair"? In the name of all Paris, the delegates of the Twenty Arrondissements demanded arms for the people, free rations and an all-out attack. "Make way for the people! Make way for the Commune!"

Trochu replied that he would never surrender, and immediately prepared a sortie against the enemy. This sortie was later summarized as follows by historian Maxime du Camp, the most hostile of all commentators on the Commune: "They

\* i.e. 1789, the French Revolution — *transl. note*

hoped to turn these National Guards into pacifists by throwing them head-long into dreadful peril.”<sup>38</sup> It was the absurd, the bloody Buzenval sortie of January 19. The few National Guard who survived it (and 4,070 officers and soldiers didn’t), however, understood perfectly well that this ill-prepared, ill-led adventure had had no other purpose than to show the Parisians the impossibility of any further resistance. Vinoy replaced Trochu as military governor of Paris, while General Clément Thomas called on the National Guard, not to fight the Prussians, but rather “to rise up in full force and crush the rebels.”

Furious, swindled, decimated, betrayed, the National Guards and the clubs decided on January 21 to hold a demonstration the following day in front of City Hall. That night, a group of armed men forced the release of Flourens and some other revolutionaries from Mazas prison.

The crowd was there, come January 22, at City Hall. Louise Michel, André Léo, the women of the Montmartre Vigilance Committee, worthy Mme Poirier, old Mme Blin, flaxen-haired Béatrix Excoffon — they were all there. Louise wore the uniform of the National Guard and carried her pistol. The crowd cried: “No surrender! War to the end! Long live the Commune!”

They could see Trochu’s Breton mobile guards massed at the windows of City Hall. They sent in delegates but Chaudey, assistant deputy mayor for Paris, and a Proudhonist, refused to let them pass. A moment later, a spray of bullets hit the square. “The shot sounded like hail in a summer storm.” The Bretons were using live ammunition. Some of the National Guards who fired back carefully aimed at the walls. “Not me,” said Louise Michel.

That was the first time she had ever heard the whine of bullets, and she responded to it with a sort of joyous rage: “The first time you take up arms in defence of your cause, you enter into the struggle so completely that you yourself become a sort of projectile.” Even so, her judgment remained calm. The people of Paris were being confronted by their own brothers, their erring brothers forced to defend an alien cause. “I couldn’t take my eyes off those pale, savage faces at the windows. They fired on us without emotion, like machines, just as they might fire at a pack of wolves [always wolves...]. And I thought: you’ll join us one day, you brigands, for you can’t be bought.

And we need people who refuse to sell themselves. My old grandfather's stories flooded into my mind, stories of the days when heroes battled heroes remorselessly, when the peasants of Charette, of Cathelineau, of La Rochejaquelein battled the armies of the Republic."\*<sup>39</sup>

Bretons, for Louise, were surrounded by their own special halo. They were the link back through history to Vercingetorix and his Gauls; they were hard and loyal men who, somehow, had to be reached through their religious faith and their legends, for once they understood the glory of the Revolution, they would become its most unwavering supporters.

The hail of bullets continued. Men died, a woman crumpled at Louise's side. "Yes, you're the ones, you Armorican\*\* savages, blond-haired savages, you're responsible for all this. But at least you are fanatics, and not mercenaries. [Louise, a fanatic herself, thought fanaticism a virtue.] You kill us because you think you should, but one day you'll join us and fight for Liberty. You'll bring to that fight the same fierce conviction you display right now and together we shall mount the assault on the old world."\*<sup>40</sup>

Oh, I love Louise in her prophet's role. But we must leave these poetic heights for the ground-level reality of daily life and political turmoil.

That same evening, Jules Ferry\*\*\* gave his version of the day's events. As in every war-time communiqué, the other side attacked first: "They attacked us with bombs and explosives. Aggression..." etc. A good pretext, anyway, for imposing law and order on those *enragés* who had survived the Buzenval slaughter. The clubs were banned, seventeen papers suppressed, the "ringleaders" arrested. Flourens, who had just escaped thanks to the assault on the Mazas jail, was once again sentenced to death (this time in absentia), as were Blanqui and Pyat.

On January 29, Paris learned that an armistice had been concluded with the Prussians: Paris was to be disarmed, the army in Paris (with the exception of one division) was to surrender, the forts to be occupied by the Prussians, and a war

\* i.e. peasants who sided with these Royalist leaders against the First Republic

\*\* Armorica is a section of Brittany

\*\*\* then a member of the Government of National Defence; later a prime minister of France — *transl. notes*



indemnity of two hundred million francs paid within two weeks. By making peace with the Prussians (men of order and discipline), the government would finally be free to deal with the people of Paris.

Elections for a National Assembly were called for February 8, and the results set up another *chambre introuvable*.\* The rural areas, the peasantry, elected the most conservative aristocrats possible, the notaries most devoted to the status-quo, the greasiest of petty squires. And, at their head, M. Adolphe Thiers, who was Daumier's\*\* chosen perfect image of the bourgeoisie. The Paris deputies, on the other hand, represented every political tendency imaginable, but only six of them favoured peace at any price.

The preliminaries to this peace agreement were signed on February 26: France was to pay Germany five billion francs, give up Alsace (minus Belfort) and one-third of Lorraine, and — the ultimate dishonour, in Parisian eyes — allow the German army to march into the city.

The Prussians would be denied one thing at least, if Parisians had their way: the cannons, the cannons that had been purchased by public subscription. On the 26th, therefore, the people of Paris went to the fashionable districts and dragged the cannons away to the heights of land in their own working-class districts of Chaumont, Belleville and Montmartre. Just let anyone try to seize them! On March 1, the Prussians finally marched through the pointedly empty streets and quit the city again the following day. A brief stay.

The National Assembly, which had installed itself in Versailles (such a reassuring city\*\*\*), could now forget about the Prussians and concentrate on the Parisians. What did the daily lot of the Parisian people matter to the large landowners and rural industrialists? Who cared about the death-toll from the siege, or the condition of the survivors? The Assembly immediately began to develop its policies on clear class lines. The commercial bills still outstanding of businesses which had gone into bankruptcy between August 13 and November 13 were now declared payable on demand, although there was no more

\* i.e. the "Unfindable Chamber" — a phrase coined by Louis XVIII in gratified amazement when the elections of 1815 somehow managed to turn up a pro-Royalist majority for the Chamber of Deputies

\*\* French painter, sculptor and political caricaturist

\*\*\* for its royalist connotations and its conservative nature — *transl. notes*

commerce in the city and no way to pay; the daily wage of the National Guards (1 franc 50), which helped keep both them and their families alive, was cancelled, although there was no other work to be had. And then, on March 8, the government tried to disarm Paris, to remove the cannons. The stage was now set for a confrontation between the bourgeois republic and the people.

## V - LONG LIVE THE COMMUNE

M. Thiers was quite convinced that with the constabulary, the police, 15,000 troops and General Vinoy, the people of Paris could easily be brought to heel. But first, he would have to prepare the fevered public mood for the inevitable submission. On March 17, therefore, he issued the following proclamation: "For some time now, ill-intentioned men have used the pretext of resisting the Prussians, who are no longer before our walls [he stressed], to justify their control over a part of the city..." A secret committee, he went on, was claiming sole authority over one section of the National Guard and thus flouting the authority of General d'Aurelles de Paladine, "a man most worthy to be your leader." (But Parisians had had enough of these worthy generals who had nonetheless lost the war.) "These men tack up posters claiming they defended you from the Prussians who, in fact, did nothing more than appear before your walls [Thiers did belabour the point], levelling the guns which, had they opened fire, would have meant your own destruction, homes, children and all." Obviously, the government could already have retaken the public-subscription cannons, jailed the criminals, etc., but it wished to allow time for "misguided men to dissociate themselves from those who have misguided them." And so, the government called on "all good Parisians" to help them retake the guns and restore order. And finally, a threat: "Having received this notice, you will now approve our recourse to force." Louise shrugged: "M. Thiers' proclamation meant about as much to us as one from

King Dagobert\* would have done.”<sup>1</sup>

General d'Aurelles de Paladine had roughly the same impact when he in turn called on “good” National Guards to defend their city, their homes, their families and their possessions. The cannons were to be retaken that same night, March 17. The operation was as ill-prepared as the war itself had been — they forgot to bring the horses needed to drag away the guns — and it was entrusted to soldiers who were sick and tired of defeats and the officers who caused them.

From its side of the lines, the Central Committee of the Twenty Arrondissements kept watch, the Vigilance Committees kept watch. Louise Michel had come to La Butte-Montmartre bearing a message and so she did her surveillance from the post of the Sixty-first Battalion at 6 Rue des Rosiers. A shot was fired, its source unknown, which wounded National Guardsman Turpin, who was on sentry-duty. Louise and a canteen worker gave him first aid while waiting for Clemenceau, who was not only mayor of Montmartre but a physician as well.

And then Louise, rifle under her coat, rushed down from the Butte to sound the alarm, crying, “Treason!” At the Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement, Ferré, old Moreau and Avronsart were already forming up a column. Louise was at fever pitch, joyously anticipating the coming battle: “The warning bell sounded at dawn and we charged the slope, knowing that an army in full battle formation was waiting for us on top. We thought we were going to die for liberty. We were transported...” And then, with her usual poetic sensitivity to the colours and textures of the moment: “The Butte was enveloped in a white glow, a splendid dawn of deliverance.”<sup>2</sup>

The women of Montmartre made the climb with their men — including old Marianne who, worried, had come looking for her impossible daughter. “It gave me great anguish,” said Louise, when she suddenly found her mother at her side.<sup>3</sup>

But there was no battle after all on the heights of Montmartre. The women threw themselves on the cannons and the soldiers, taken by surprise, made no move. General Lecomte gave the order to fire on the crowd but a junior officer countered it, and the troops reversed their arms.<sup>4</sup> Throughout Paris, that strange scene of fraternization was repeated as

\* King of the Franks — *transl. note*

women, National Guards and disconcerted soldiers mingled peacefully.

That evening on Rue des Rosiers, General Lecomte (who had given the order to fire) and General Clément Thomas (remembered for his role in the massacres of June 1848), both of whom had been taken prisoner in the course of the day, were killed. The Montmartre revolutionaries could perhaps have saved their lives, says Louise, but "tempers flared, there was a scuffle, and guns went off."<sup>5</sup> With a courtesy rare in any war and rarest of all in civil war, she then saluted the courage of Clément Thomas: "He died well."<sup>6</sup> Ferré and Jaclard ordered the release of the other officers who had been captured that day: "We wished to avoid both cowardice and pointless cruelty."<sup>7</sup>

Turpin, the wounded sentry, died several days later. On the day of his funeral Ferré cried, "To Versailles!" and the crowd shouted back, "To Versailles!"<sup>8</sup> The Montmartre revolutionaries wanted to march immediately on the city where the government had taken refuge. Louise Michel agreed entirely: "Victory was ours. It could have been made permanent had we set out the next day, en masse, for Versailles... Many would have died along the way, but our victory would have been irreversible." Later, looking back on the events of March 18 (her analysis at the time was undoubtedly not this clear), she said, "Legality, universal suffrage...as usual these kinds of scruples arose, and they are fatal to any Revolution."<sup>9</sup>

For the Central Committee did not agree with the proposed march on Versailles. It was suddenly master of Paris and felt the burden of its responsibility for human lives. It therefore rejected armed confrontation and opted for legality. It used wall-posters to explain to Parisians the nature of the Committee and its goals. First, it thanked the army for its reluctance to "raise its hand against the sacred ark of our liberties" and called on Paris and France "whatever the consequences, to start building the republic together, for it is the only form of government capable of putting an end once and for all to foreign invasions and civil war." The Central Committee therefore called the people of Paris to new elections. Meanwhile, it lifted martial law, re-established freedom of the press, abolished councils of war, granted amnesty to political prisoners and sent its own representatives to run the various

ministries whose responsible officials had deserted them.

With perfect legality, the Central Committee borrowed money from M. de Rothschild and from the Bank of France, in order to meet its expenses. Meanwhile, in Versailles, the Assembly flatly condemned the rebel government. No reconciliation was possible.

On March 25, the Central Committee issued yet another poster, this time concerning the elections set for the following day: "The men who still serve you best are those whom you choose from among your own ranks, who live your life and suffer the same hardships." It declared it would hand over control to the new representatives. Versailles' answer was to call on the people of Paris to stand firm with its National Assembly in its opposition to these "criminals," these "madmen," who so dishonoured their city. Despite the appeal, 229,000 Parisians\* — predominantly from the working-class districts — turned out to vote.

On March 29, in front of City Hall, the Central Committee solemnly handed over its powers to the new Paris Commune.

Obviously, being a woman, Louise Michel had played no part in the elections. The role of women during the Commune was important but still marginal, and well removed from political decision-making. Louise exulted anyway: this time, the Revolution had triumphed and moreover, Ferré was one of those elected from the eighteenth arrondissement. His triumph was some compensation at least. Even better, it was the triumph of the people of Paris as a whole. Louise was dazzled by the ceremony and described it with her customary lyricism:

"A human sea, all bearing arms, their bayonets pressed as tightly together as flowers in a field, with the sound of the brass splitting the air and the heavy beat of the drums and, dominating it all, the unmistakable roll of the two great drums of Montmartre, the drums that woke all Paris the night the Prussians marched in and again on the morning of March 18. All that indescribable sound, produced by a pair of sinewy wrists clutching a pair of fragile sticks..." This was the great orchestra of brass and drums that she had dreamed of the day she composed *Un Rêve des sabbats*. "The heavy voice of the cannons boomed a measured salute to the Revolution." The bayonets dipped before the red flags that surrounded the bust

\* men only, of course — *transl. note*

of the Republic. The battalions of Montmartre, Belleville and La Chapelle had topped each of their flags with the "red flag of liberty," the Phrygian cap made famous during the French Revolution. They looked like the platoons of '93 all over again.

The members of the Central Committee were grouped on a platform, with the members of the new Commune before them. "Every one with his red sash. A few speeches, punctuated by the cannon salutes." The Central Committee declared its mandate at an end and handed over its powers to the Commune. The names of the new delegates were read to the crowd. A great cry went up, "Long live the Commune!" The drums rolled, cannons roared. "In the name of the people, the Commune is proclaimed!" As Louise put it later, "A spectacular opening for the Commune, whose grand finale was to be death."<sup>10</sup>

Louise followed enthusiastically the measures voted by the Commune, the achievements which have given it historical stature. Limited social measures though they were, they did seek to ease the daily life of the people: an embargo on the sale of pawned articles with a value of 25 francs or less (during the siege, people with nothing more than a mattress or stove to their names made constant use of the "pauper's bank"); confiscation of property in mortmain\*; food rations for injured Guardsmen; pension rights extended to common-law wives and natural children (a measure that simply recognized a fact of proletarian life and its disregard for civil and religious law); abolition of grants to religious organizations; election of magistrates by the citizens; abolition of fines and penalties in the workshops; abolition of night-work in bakeries. However, and this is indicative of the "idealistic" side of Louise's nature, she seems not to have grasped the importance of the directives concerning the organization of labour which were issued by Frankel and Elizabeth Dmitrieff. These two, who were friends of Marx, understood much better than the other Communards the importance of economic transformation. Louise was an idealist and a mystic; her Revolution was an emotional affair of charity and political opposition to Versailles.

She was also keenly interested in the intellectual development of the Commune. Courbet dreamed of a Paris "in

\* Mortmain (lit. "dead hand"): property held in mortmain was property held by ecclesiastical or other corporations deemed to be eternal and thus, was property held in perpetuity — *transl. note*

which each person could freely follow his own genius, "a Paris more beautiful than any other city in Europe, since its own citizens would be responsible for its organization. The city's artists — including Corot, Courbet, Daumier, Manet — came together and formed a Federation of Paris Artists. The museums stayed open. The scholars at the Academy of Sciences continued their work. "We wanted it all and we wanted it right away — art, science, literature, discoveries. Our lives flamed with enthusiasm. We were so eager to leave the old world behind."<sup>11</sup>

Being a teacher herself, Louise was naturally obsessed with the need for reform in education. Groups like New Education, and the Society of Friends of Instruction thought the time had come to reorganize education and start training children to be responsible citizens. Louise sent the Commune a suggested methodology, which was based on her own long professional experience. It consisted of teaching children their basics with as few words as possible, those few words being carefully selected to match the students' level of comprehension. There was to be greatly increased attention to the visual arts: she suggested, for example, giant tableaux representing the major events in world history and the five divisions of the world. (We know what importance visual aids have since been given in pedagogy.) Yet it wasn't enough to develop the children's intelligence. They must also be given a high and unwavering moral sense. "Their conscience must be so developed that the only possible reward or punishment would be the feeling of duty done, or of wrong behaviour." She was talking about a secular morality, of course, without reference to any religion whatsoever, though she did allow for religious choice by the parents.<sup>12</sup>

This was a major concession: Louise had become violently anticlerical and antireligious. In *La Patrie en danger*, she had already compared religious workshops to houses of prostitution, in that both were "places of corruption."<sup>13</sup> Now she attacked again. In the name of the women's Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement, she asked the members of the Commune "to establish vocational schools and secular orphanages immediately, to replace the schools and orphanages now run by the ignoramus of both sexes." Never again, she declared, would "our sons be sent to the king's slaughterhouses and our daughters served up as food for the passions." That, unfortunately, is a fair representation of Louise Michel's style



and explains why it is difficult to take her seriously as a writer. She would follow a perfectly reasonable statement — “We wish all to receive a state education” — with a relapse into her preferred maudlin terminology: “May the fields no longer run with blood and the muddy streets no longer throng with prostitutes; may a free people forever proclaim their universal Republic.” Mme Poirier and the others unflinchingly signed their names to this purple prose — or else Louise, as she was later to claim, signed their names for them. If so, they were to pay a heavy price for this forgery.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, Louise “kept watch,” pointed out the weak and the potentially traitorous: *Citoyenne* Renaud of 24 Rue Oudot, Montmartre, has informed me that the commander of the 142nd regularly visits Versailles.”<sup>15</sup> Or: “Be on your guard against one of our friends, a man of book-learning but little common sense, who seems to be trying to avoid doing his tour of duty on the line. He is a good soldier, and we have need of him... I am speaking of citizen Potin.”<sup>16</sup> This is another demonstration of Louise’s lack of realism. She just didn’t understand that it’s very dangerous business to press-gang reluctant men into the front ranks of the Revolution.

The, suddenly, Louise had a brainstorm: it was time to go to Versailles and assassinate M. Thiers. Tyrannicide was one of the more simplistic and exalting of the old revolutionary mythologies, and it appealed strongly to her. Her dream of assassinating Napoleon III had remained just that, a pipedream. This time, however, she confided her project to Ferré. Perhaps it was a bit of feminine coquetry as well, an urge to show her beloved just how devoted she was to their common cause. And too, she may have wanted to prove to Ferré, who (like most of the Communards) was anti-feminist, that women were also capable of great courage. “I thought that killing M. Thiers right in the Assembly would provoke such terror that the reaction against us would be stopped dead.”<sup>17</sup> Ferré had much more political sense than Louise. He reminded her that the deaths of Generals Lecomte and Clément Thomas had needlessly shocked public opinion in both the provinces and Paris itself, and had been widely condemned. Assassinating Thiers would crush the revolution, not the reaction. “I didn’t agree and I didn’t think public disapproval mattered as long as the act itself was useful to the Revolution. But, it was just possible that he was right.” Rigault, the Commune’s delegate to the prefecture of police, agreed with

Ferré. The two men then added, "And anyway, you'd never make it to Versailles." 18

Louise accepted the challenge. Very well, she would give up her idea of assassinating Thiers, but she would prove to them that she could reach Versailles. A few days later, she set out on her rather childish escapade. These were still early days in revolutionary history, when the principals in the drama had the taste and the time for such pranks. Louise, so respectably dressed that her own shadow wouldn't have recognized her, peacefully made her way to Versailles, took a stroll around the park which was being used as an army camp and paused long enough to make a little propaganda for the revolution of March 18. Soldiers listened to this strange woman and, sure enough, the next day an officer changed sides. Louise sent him off to Paris with a letter of introduction: "Citizen L [illegible], I present to you citizen Jules Dupont, whom I met in Versailles. He would like to join General Eudes but, in the interim, puts himself entirely at your disposal for any task useful to the cause. Here, then, is citizen Jules Dupont, whom I recommend to you as a good citizen and our friend. Salutations and equality." 19

Louise went next to large Versailles bookstore. She made a very favourable impression on the clerk, bought some newspapers as proof of her successful trip and then, having amused herself by telling the poor clerk the most scandalous tales she could invent about "that woman" Louise Michel, set out on her return trip to Paris.

Amusing herself by blackening her reputation: she was to indulge in this sort of prank more than once. But, I think, it was more than a prank; I think it was an unconscious urge to play a role, to give herself an importance that, at the time, she really didn't have. For Louise often seemed to be "playing" her own life and she handled that role perfectly until the day she died — precisely because the person she chose to play corresponded so well to her real self.

Once back in Paris, Louise went immediately to tell her story to the Montmartre officials, who didn't even recognize her in her respectable middle-class disguise, and then went to tease Rigault and Ferré (especially Ferré...), whom she called a pair of "Girondists." \*20

\* allusion to the "moderate" republican party during the French Revolution and thus a suggestion that Rigault and Ferré, unlike herself, quailed at strong action — *transl. note*

There were soon to be much more serious matters to occupy her time, and she rose magnificently to the occasion. At the beginning of April, Versailles declared war on Paris. From then on, Louise never stopped. Ambulance nurse and soldier both, she was to be seen in Clamart, Issy, Neuilly — wherever there was danger, combat and wounded soldiers to be cared for. Moreover, she knew how to describe what she observed and felt. Whenever she is reporting events in which she had been personally involved, relating impressions directly received, her accounts are excellent.

She wore the uniform of the National Guard, and belonged to the Montmartre Sixty-first Battalion, under the command of Emile Eudes. (He was also the husband of her friend Victorine Louvet whom, on that long-ago vacation, she had taken to the sacred oak and made listen to her poem about human sacrifice among the Gauls. Victorine Louvet also turned out to be pretty handy with a gun.)

Early April: "Here we are on Champs-de-Mars, our weapons stacked in neat piles; it's a lovely night..." Louise finally had a "good weapon," a Remington carbine. She'd spun a network of reassuring white lies around her mother, with incredible attention to detail. There she sat expecting battle, with letters in her pocket ready to be posted to her mother that described her work with an ambulance and her intention to drop by for a visit.<sup>21</sup> She'd taken care of everything at the school as well, having made over to her assistant Malvina Poulain an acknowledgement of a debt of 158 francs for honoraria.<sup>22</sup> All her obligations, then, had been met, both to her mother and to the teacher who would try to carry on in her absence (with old Marianne's assistance). Now Louise was quite marvellously free to fight for liberty. "Now we fall silent, it's time for battle. There's a hillside before us, I charge toward it, crying 'To Versailles! To Versailles!' Razoua throws me his sabre, we clasp hands. Above us, a shower of projectiles; heaven itself is on fire..." They formed up their ranks for the expected skirmish. "You'd think we were old hands at this line of work."<sup>23</sup>

Now they've reached Les Moulineaux. They camp at the Jesuit monastery. "The Montmartre people and myself, all of us who had expected to advance further than this, we cry with rage. But we're confident..." The Jesuits were all gone save one, an old man who said he wasn't afraid of the Commune. Louise thought the monastery cook looked a lot like Frère Jean des

Entommeures.\* She cast her eye over the monastery's paintings and found them uniformly hideous.<sup>24</sup>

Now they've reached the Clamart trenches. One night she stood watch accompanied by an old Pontifical Zouave who had gone over to the Commune. "Once, as we passed each other in the trenches, he looked at me and asked, 'What effect has this kind of life had on you?' I answered, 'Well, it has taught me that there is a river before us which must be crossed.' "<sup>25</sup>

And another night, she stands guard in the Clamart cemetery. "I looked out over the tombs, abruptly flashing under an artillery flare and then lit by nothing more than the moon, but even so, gleaming like white phantoms, with the play of gunfire behind them all..."<sup>26</sup>

Tombs, the moon, gunfire...here at last was a decor tailor-made for Louise Michel. Gun in hand, she was to throw herself into the tragedy, the great tragedy of the Revolution that offered her the role to which she had always felt herself called. Yet her sense of high drama didn't blind her to small details: climbing the rise to the Issy fort ("a spectral fort" that might have been drawn by Victor Hugo or Louise Michel herself), her eye picked out "the violets in the field, crushed under the dropping shells."<sup>27</sup>

Then the Clamart station. Under furious bombardment by Versailles forces, one young man panicked and wanted to surrender. "Go ahead if you want to," said Louise. "But I'm staying here and if you try to surrender the station itself, I'll blow it up." And she sat down, candle in hand, next to their munitions dump. The young man fled in the morning and was never seen again.<sup>28</sup>

Or another bombardment: here's Louise calmly drinking coffee and reading Baudelaire to a student who was trying to calculate where the shells would probably land.<sup>29</sup>

Her contempt for danger, her disregard for even the most elementary precautions, sometimes annoyed her comrades. Called to the barricade on Rue Peironnet in Neuilly, she went off to play the organ in the deserted Protestant church. "I was having a wonderful time, when a captain and three or four furious Federals\*\* suddenly burst in the door. 'So you're the one

\* one of Rabelais' creations: a brawling, zestful monk for whom Gargantua had the abbey of Thélème constructed

\*\* the *Fédérés*, i.e. the members of the 215 Paris battalions (out of a total of some 270) which supported the revolutionary cause and on March 3, 1871, formed the Republican Federation of the National Guard — *transl. notes*

drawing enemy fire on this barricade. I came to find whoever was responsible, and shoot him.' Thus ended my attempts to compose a few harmonies in imitation of the dancing bombs."<sup>30</sup>

Her anecdotes are borne out by this item which appeared in the *Journal Officiel*\* of the Commune. "There is an energetic woman fighting in the ranks of the Sixty-first Battalion. She has killed several constables and police officers."<sup>31</sup> Goullé offers further corroboration when he describes Louise at Clamart, a képi on her head, hobnailed boots on her feet, standing the midnight watch alone so that the men might rest. "She exercised a strange power over them..."<sup>32</sup> George Clemenceau saw her in action at Issy: "In order not to be killed herself, she killed others... I have never seen her to be more calm. How she escaped being killed a hundred times over before my very eyes, I'll never know. And I only watched her for an hour..."<sup>33</sup> It was as if some kind of lucky charm were keeping her safe. *Le Cri du peuple* once announced that *citoyenne* Louise Michel, who had fought so valiantly at Les Moulineaux, had been wounded at the Issy fort. It was mistaken; she had suffered only a sprain.<sup>34</sup>

Robust, tireless, *enragée*, whenever the Sixty-first Battalion took a few days rest, she promptly joined another company. And so she numbered among her companions in arms, "the gunners of Issy and Neuilly and the scouts of Montmartre."<sup>35</sup>

She thought about her own behaviour and, I think, analyzed it accurately. "Was it sheer bravery that caused me to be so enchanted with the sight of the battered Issy fort gleaming faintly in the night, or with the sight of our lines on night manoeuvres, filing past the slopes of Clamart, or heading for Hautes-Bruyères, with the red teeth of the *mitrailleuse*\*\* flashing on the horizon? It wasn't bravery; I just thought it a beautiful sight. My eyes and my heart responded, as did my ears to the sound of the cannon. Oh, I'm a savage all right, I love the smell of powder, grapeshot flying through the air, but above all, I'm devoted to the Revolution."<sup>36</sup> What she had loved of Catholicism, after all, had been the shadowy depths of

\* the French Government's daily publication for official information and decrees which, after March 18, continued to appear but as an organ of the revolutionary government, through its articles were not normally official policy statements of that government or its bodies

\*\* the ancestor of the machine-gun, a multiple-barrelled gun invented by the French and first unveiled in the Franco-Prussian War — *transl. notes*

the churches, the flickering candles, and the beauty of the ancient chants. She recalled her youth and reached the conclusions offered by her now-determinist philosophy: "It was inevitable: the wind blowing through the ruined chateau, the old people who raised me, the solitude and enormous liberty of my youth, the bits of scientific knowledge which I accumulated as best I might...these influences combined to make my ear receptive to all sorts of harmonies, my mind to all sorts of inspirations, my heart to both love and hatred. And it all came together in a single song, a single dream, a single love: the Revolution."<sup>37</sup>

Louise might have added her irregular birth to this list of determining factors, for it set her forever on the margin of society and made her all the more sensitive to society's other injustices. Elizabeth Dmitrieff, another of the Commune heroines, had similar origins, being the daughter of a nurse and a former Hussar officer who never acknowledged her as anything more than his ward.

Had Louise been a man, she would very likely have been content to be a soldier, nothing more. But, being a woman, she lived this war on two planes. She fought and killed, but she also dragged the wounded to safety and nursed them, Versailles and Federal both. This may appear contradictory, but Louise throughout her life lived that contradiction: revolution and charity. It was her sense of charity, after all, which made her insist on the revolution.

So Louise was a soldier with the masculine side of her character and an ambulance nurse with the feminine; she set the tone for all the other ambulance nurses as well, they were both nurses and active combatants. These women, independent of both society and outside organization, gave their lives to the Revolution. "Their duty is to treat the wounded where they fall, to take up a gun where required. Their right, and they'll claim it, would be to set match to powder wherever reaction might triumph, for the Revolution must not be vanquished. Long live the Commune! Long live the Republic!" This document is very much in Louise Michel's style, but she had it co-signed by Mmes Fernandez, Gaullé, Poulain, Quartier and Dauguet.<sup>38</sup>

The officials of the Commune, just like the army officers, very much distrusted these women who were out running around the battlefields instead of sticking to their kitchens. Misogyny, after all, is an ancient reflex, almost biological it

seems, and was quite apparent among the Communards as well as the Versailles reactionaries. The fine journalist André Léo\* wrote about interviewing Louise Michel one day when she was cooling her heels with some comrades in Neuilly, waiting for someone to put them to work. "Oh," said Louise, "if only they'd let us care for the wounded. But if you knew the obstacles they put in our way, the backbiting, the hostility!"<sup>39</sup>

Sometimes, they were even refused food rations. There was a most revealing exchange of correspondence on this subject between Louise and Varlin, who was responsible for supplies. Letters from this era are rare, and because these two are so pertinent, I quote them in full. Louise wrote, "Citizen Varlin, since the authority of your signature is being used to deny us rations, I think it my duty to inform you of the situation. I believe you would like your signature to be treated with respect. Would you kindly send me word on this matter. I am ordinarily to be found with the ambulance stationed at the Fourth Engineer Corps headquarters. Greetings and Equality. Louise Michel, volunteer ambulance nurse of the Commune."<sup>40</sup> Varlin replied, on May 3: "*Citoyenne* Louise Michel, ambulance nurse of the Commune, has the right to draw campaign rations. The administrative officers in the forts and battlegrounds where she serves are accordingly to supply her with food."<sup>41</sup>

Louise was better suited to a good Remington carbine than to logistical squabbles like this one, but sometimes they demanded her attention. She also directed the recruitment of women volunteers for the ambulances. Some prostitutes wished to sign on, but the squeamish gentlemen revolutionaries of the Commune had refused them this honour: "the wounded must be tended by pure hands." Louise had quite a different view of the matter. She insisted these women were not to blame for their lives: "Who has more right than these women, the most pitiful of the old order's victims, to give their lives for the new?"<sup>42</sup> She had the women's Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement take these prostitutes under their patronage.<sup>43</sup> Most of them were to die, and courageously, during the bloody week in May.

With all this to occupy her, Louise scarcely had time any

\* ever since George Sand and Daniel Stern, a masculine first name had been considered *de rigueur* in the world of letters and indeed, Louise herself had signed her first poems either "Louis" or with the pseudonym "Enjolras" — *author's note*

more to chair the meetings of the revolutionary clubs. Nonetheless, she sent them motions<sup>44</sup> for their voted approval, to be presented by Mme Poirier or Béatrix Excoffon, depending on who was replacing her in the chair that particular day. One motion called for the elimination of the magistracy and its replacement by a commission of justice, the abolition of public worship, the confiscation of all ecclesiastical holdings and an exchange of Versailles prisoners for Blanqui. This last suggestion, however, was somehow transformed from "exchange of prisoners" to "execution of hostages."<sup>45</sup>

And then, on May 21, while the Commune sat in its meeting and debated the subject of theatrical performances in the city, Versailles troops entered Paris. The battle was on. The old Jacobin Delescluze was now military commander (after Cluseret and Rossel), charged with the impossible task of defending the Commune. He called for revolutionary struggle, thus destroying the last vestiges of regular discipline still to be found in the Federal ranks. "An end to militarism, away with gold-swagged army officers. Make way for the civilian combatant with his bare hands. It is time for revolutionary war..."

And so it began...desperate, frenzied, admirable battle; street by street, house by house, barricade by barricade; men, women, children, all of them soldiers of the Commune. The regular army, M. Thiers' honourable troops, had received orders to slaughter "in cold blood" all those who looked like *communeaux*.<sup>\*</sup> Dirty hands and ragged clothes were enough; should an unfortunate error be made, God would pick out his own.

Dombrowski had immediately sent Louise Michel, Mme Mariani and a few Federals to warn the Montmartre Vigilance Committee that the Versailles troops had entered Paris. "I don't know what time it was. The night was calm and beautiful. What did the time matter? What mattered now was that the revolution not be defeated, even in death." The Vigilance Committee then met at the Montmartre town hall, where Cecilia tried to organize the last resistance. Louise Michel and old Moreau went to examine the Butte, hoping to find some way to blow it up. The task was beyond the technology of the age, but Louise insisted on trying. At the town hall she found

<sup>\*</sup> partisans of the Commune are now regularly known as Communards, but terminology at the time itself was still variable — *transl. note*



all her old comrades of the Sixty-first Battalion, the ones with whom she had done most of her fighting, at Issy and Clamart. They said to her, "You were with us from the beginning, you must be with us to the end."

Louise first made Moreau promise that "the Butte will explode" and then set out with a detachment of the Sixty-first to keep guard in Montmartre cemetery. "Shells come over at regular intervals like the ticking of a clock, the clock of death. The clear night air is sweet with the perfume of the flowers, and the very tombstones seem alive." She came across the spot where a shell had fallen, glancing off a tree and sinking into the flowers below. She gathered those flowers, putting some on Murger's tombstone and the rest on that of old Mlle Poulin who had briefly helped her run her school on Rue Oudot.<sup>46</sup> Louise had always observed this old provincial ritual of laying flowers on graves, so here she was, in the midst of battle, carrying on like an old peasant woman on All Saints' Day...

And then she had what she forever after remembered as a transfiguring experience. She had just explored the whole cemetery to make sure every entrance was guarded — and for the sheer pleasure of walking those long pathways in moonlight. "It was the profound calm of death, which I have always loved so much." Then, pausing a moment before the tomb of Mlle Poulin: "I don't quite know what happened to me, but suddenly my life was one with all eternity and I knew, without any sense of surprise, that Mlle Poulin was very close to me. I remained in that state for quite a long while. It's impossible to convey to you [this strange tale was in a letter to Ferré] the curious experience I was undergoing." Louise knew they were defeated, yet she walked on, as if guided by her old friend. And, still in this altered state, she found two undefended gaps in the cemetery wall. "I shall never forget that night. There really is a life after death..."<sup>47</sup>

It would have been useless for Louise to try to explain this unprecedented experience to her comrades, who had always been so exasperated by her lack of prudence — her Versailles promenade, for example, or the time in Clamart she read Beaude-laïre while under fire, or the time in Neuilly when she played the organ near the barricade, or the time she ran out on the battlefield to save a cat. "This time," they would have said, "you'll stay put."

My feeling is that Louise "played" her life, in every sense of

the word "play"\* and on every level.

The handful of defenders at the Montmartre cemetery were falling, one by one. Louise sped to the town hall, gathered up some fifty reinforcements whom she led back to the cemetery, some of them dying on the way. Upon her return, there were only fifteen Federals left: "Our ranks are thinner and thinner, but we can vouch for the barricades; they still hold."

From barricade to barricade, Louise picked her way to Chaussée-Clignancourt. There she was glimpsed by the seamstress Blanche Lefebvre, "who loved the revolution as a man loves a woman" and who died in the final battle at Place Blanche.<sup>48</sup>

Soon after, Dombrowski came past on horseback. "We're lost," he said. "No!" replied Louise. They shook hands and, moments later, he was fatally wounded.

There had been seven on the barricades, now they were three: Louise, a Federal captain and a Breton (Brittany once again), "stocky, square-shouldered, with blond hair and blue eyes. That Breton wasn't Charette's man any longer. He embraced his new faith with the same passion he must have felt for the old, when he still believed in it." Louise also noted his "white, wolfish teeth." (the wolves again — like all poets, she constantly surrounded herself with her own chosen universe.) Suddenly, some more Federals appeared. "Over here!" cried Louise. "There are only three of us left!"

Then, as she wrote later, "I felt myself being grabbed, lifted and flung back into the trench, as if they were going to murder me..." For the soldiers were not Federals, but Versailles troops in false uniforms. When Louise, head spinning, managed to get to her feet again, her last two comrades had disappeared and the Versaillese were conducting a house-to-house search. She managed to evade them and ran off crying, "Set the fires! Fire, fire! There's only one barricade left!"<sup>49</sup>

Sporadic fighting still continued. The women who hadn't died on the barricade at Place Blanche fought on in Place Pigalle. Les Batignolles and Montmartre were taken. "It was a massacre." The Tuileries, the Court of Accounts, the Legion of Honour, were all in flames. Old Delescluze, in top hat, frock coat and black trousers, was killed on top of the barricade, leaning on

\* consider: to play; to gamble or speculate; to set in motion; to touch off; to operate; to stake, wager; to move a piece on a board; to trick or fool — *transl. note*

his cane. Versailles troops slaughtered as they came; massacre for massacre, the frantic mobs shouted for the blood of the Commune's hostages.\* Federals battled on among the tombs of Père-Lachaise, with the last of them going down on May 27 at the "Wall of the Federals" on Rue du Repos. Ferré, Varlin and Jean-Baptiste Clément draped a final barricade in a red flag on Rue Fontaine-au-Roi, and managed to hold out until morning.

The forces of order had triumphed, but the massacre went on for good measure. Troops with flaming torches and dogs chased fleeing men right into the catacombs. "The dead were everywhere, and their stench hung over the dead city. Frightful swarms of flies attacked the bodies. Finally the victors, fearing an outbreak of plague, called a halt to the executions."<sup>50</sup>

Nobody really knows how many victims there were. The official figure is 30, 000. The true figure is probably much higher.

From the first day of the Commune, Louise had not spent one night in her own home.<sup>51</sup> At the height of the slaughter in Montmartre, she wanted to find her mother and "reassure her with every lie I can invent." Somebody gave her a grey skirt (her own was riddled with bullet holes, though her only injury was a scratch on her wrist) and a hooded cape, so that she might obey the conventional bourgeois decencies on her quest — only young girls and working-class women went out bareheaded.<sup>52</sup> Slowly, painfully, she inched her way through the devastated streets. She found old Mme Blin, of the Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement, who had no news of her mother but did report that the children were attending school as usual. The closer Louise came to her home, the more panic-stricken she felt: "What a sepulchre Montmartre was, in those lovely days of May!"

She found the schoolyard empty, the door shut. Her little dog Finette howled in the kitchen, accompanied only by a cat. Marianne was nowhere to be seen. The concierge told Louise, "Soldiers came here looking for you but since you weren't here, they took your mother to shoot in your place." Louise, horror-stricken, fled to the nearest army post: "Where is my mother?" An officer replied, "They're probably shooting her right now."

And so Louise ran on, this time surrounded by soldiers, to Bastion 43 (she later said Bastion 37, but she was mistaken).

\* including the Archbishop of Paris, whom the Commune had vainly tried to exchange for Blanqui; Ferré would later be charged with the responsibility for these executions — *transl. note*

There, among the prisoners, was Marianne. Louise begged the commander to free her mother, since she herself had come to take her place. Marianne didn't want to go, but Louise won permission to escort her part-way home, in company with some soldiers who would then see the old woman safely to Rue Oudot. Louise did so and then, unescorted, came back to the Bastion, "as promised."<sup>53</sup>

It all seems so casual to us today. We can hardly imagine a modern officer allowing such an important prisoner as Louise Michel to set off unescorted with her mother, trusting her to return as promised. Repression was still in its infancy in 1871; it has become much more sophisticated since then.

Louise knew many of the prisoners, friends from the Vigilance Committee, the clubs of the Revolution, the Sixty-first Battalion. A gallows had been set up on a little hillock. "A pall of smoke hung over Paris; the wind carried to us, like flights of black butterflies, scraps of burned paper."<sup>54</sup> A young man was brought in, whom the officials had mistaken for Mégy. The other prisoners pointed out the mistake, but he was summarily shot.<sup>55</sup>

Then General de Galliffet and his entourage of general staff appeared on the scene. "Quite a large man, regular features, but his eyes absolutely danced with rage." Louise cast an admiring, experienced eye over his horse (they had kept horses at Vroncourt), as still and beautiful as a bronze statue.

"I am Galliffet!" announced the general. "People of Montmartre, you think me a cruel man. You're going to find out that I am much crueller than even you have imagined!" There was a general murmur among the prisoners at this statement, and suddenly Louise's voice cut through it, chanting "*C'est moi qui suis Lindor, berger de ce troupeau...*"\* Galliffet, beside himself with rage, shouted, "Shoot that rabble!" but the soldiers, sickened by all the bloodshed, refused to obey. However, two Montmartre businessmen, hardly supporters of the Commune, were indeed shot by mistake in the confusion.<sup>56</sup>

Next, the long march to Satory Plain. The prisoners were

\* a patchwork quilt of puns and allusions: Galliffet announced himself in French, "*C'est moi qui suis Galliffet.*" This must have reminded Louise of the line from a La Fontaine fable, "*C'est moi qui suis Guillot, berger de ce troupeau.*" Why she substituted the name of Lindor — Almavira's disguise in Beaumarchais' *The Barber of Seville* and thus the stock figure of a lovesick Spanish serenador — for Guillot is not clear. In any event, the sheer insolence of any reply at all was enough to set off General Galliffet — *transl. note*

closely surrounded by cavalry. Louise once again took in the scene with her poet's eye. "We walked and walked, lulled by the rhythmic beat of the horses' hooves, through a night lit by irregular red flashes of light... We were marching into the unknown, it was a misty dream, yet every detail was clear." They filed down into the La Muette ravine. "This is where you'll die," they were told. "One of the guards asked me, 'What are you thinking about?' and I told him, 'I'm just looking...' "

That was always one of her most characteristic traits, to act and to observe at the same time, to play her part in the drama yet keep enough detachment to watch it as well.

After a long pause, they took up the march once again. They were led through Versailles itself, that sacred city of reaction, where well-bred youngsters crowded around them, "howling like a pack of wolves" (always wolves). Some even drew their pistols, but the cavalry pushed them back.

The prisoners marched on. A height of land, battlements on the wall: Satory. Their escorts jeered, mockingly invited them to "storm the wall, go ahead, just like your assault on the Butte..."

The last stretch was taken at the run, under the levelled *mitrailleuses*.<sup>57</sup>

## VI - LOUISE AND THEOPHILE

Louise was a prize catch. Her arrest papers show that the military knew her value, even if the wording ran a bit to fantasy: "Michel (Louise), *captain of the sharpshooters*, plus a sizable dossier. Escorted by captains d'Hauteville and Dubos, volunteers from the Seine. Paris, Bastion 43. May 24, 1871. The Assistant Provost Marshal of the First Army Corps of Versailles."<sup>1</sup> The Prefecture of Police, unaware of this latest development, issued to the chief of police for the Municipality of Paris an order for the arrest of the Michel girl, "rabble-rouser in the clubs and the streets," in case she had not yet been sought out.<sup>2</sup> No wonder that, when she arrived at Satory, they said, "It's not worth frisking that one. She'll be shot in the morning."

Louise was put in a small room, where she found Malvina Poulain, Béatrix Excoffon, Mme Mariani, an old nun who had given a sip of water to some dying Federal soldiers and a number of other women who didn't even know if they were prisoners of Versailles or of the Commune.<sup>3</sup>

From this garret, Louise could look down on prisoners crouched in the courtyard in the falling rain. Every now and then a man would rise as his name was called and then, followed by an execution squad, he'd shoulder the shovel or the pick with which he'd have to dig his own grave. Then there'd be a shot, and then silence. One morning, they called Louise, but it was for interrogation only, and she was transferred to the Chantiers prison, in Versailles itself.<sup>4</sup>

Two or three weeks later, the female prisoners were issued a pallet of straw (each pallet to sleep two women) and rations consisting of "siege bread" (bread filled out with straw and wood slivers) and a tin of preserves for every four women. Worst of all, however, were the lice: "Minute silver lines wound across the floor, eddying like currents between 'lakes' as large as anthills and filled with pearly swarms." These lice were huge, "with bristling backs, somewhat convex, something like a wild boar but the size of a small fly instead. There were so many of them, we could even hear them rustling as they moved."<sup>5</sup>

Louise was able to write immediately to Mme Jules Simon, whose husband was minister for Public Instruction, and ask her to tell her mother what was happening. Old Marianne then begged Mme Simon, "on my knees," to intercede on behalf of her daughter. Louise, however, had a different concept of honour. She wrote Mme Simon again, saying that she had devoted herself to the Revolution and she now accepted all the consequences of that free choice, be it exile or death. She didn't want anybody ever to be able to accuse her of "cowardly behaviour." (Louise never wavered on this point all her long life.) She therefore asked only one favour: that her mother be kept informed of her fate. "Do not let impulsive friends strip me of the one thing that cannot be taken from a prisoner."<sup>6</sup>

Louise amused herself by drawing caricatures on the walls of the people who came for a Sunday outing to the prison, just to get a close look at the dreaded *pétroleuses*. She also covered the walls with requests by the said *pétroleuses* that they be permitted to remain separate from the Versailles women who had been lodged in their cell "for the express purpose of sullyng the Commune." Next she threw a pitcher of coffee at the head of one of the guards: her mother had sent her that coffee and he wanted to confiscate it. Even in jail, Louise was still very much the "agitator."<sup>7</sup>

On June 15, the deputy public prosecutor to the Fourth Council of War had Louise transferred to the Versailles reformatory.<sup>8</sup> There were advantages to the move: the reformatory offered washing facilities and clean linen.<sup>9</sup> And there, she finally heard some news: Rossel, Rochefort and Ferré had all been arrested, Ferré in particularly dramatic circumstances. The soldiers had gone to his home but found nobody there except his mother and his sister Marie, who was suffering

from a very high fever at the time. They ordered Mme Ferré to tell them her son's whereabouts. She refused. "Then we shall take your daughter instead." The poor old woman, caught in such a cruel dilemma, collapsed in delirium. They were able to pick out the words "Rue Saint-Sauveur" among her ramblings, went there and seized Ferré. (His mother later died, completely mad, at Sainte-Anne.<sup>10</sup>) And so Ferré began his own drama, parallel to that of Louise.

On June 28, Captain Briot, deputy public prosecutor of the Fourth Council of War, had Louise brought from her prison cell at one in the afternoon and formally opened his interrogation. "You are accused of having taken part in the Parisian insurrection."

Louise replied very carefully. She went on at length about the school on Rue Oudot, taking pains to absolve her mother and Malvina Poulain of any irregular behaviour: "Whenever it was in their hands, the school was run on religious lines." She explained to him her own code of morality, guided solely by conscience. And what songs did she teach the children? "Le Chant du Travail," "La Marseillaise," "Le Vengeur" ...\* What had she done during the Commune? Why, taken charge of a mobile ambulance. That accounted for her being seen in so many places, in Les Moulineaux, in Clamart, Montrouge, Neuilly... Then, when the Versaillese entered Paris, she had gone to Montmartre cemetery so as to continue aiding the wounded.

This truthful version of her interrogation (taken from police archives) is very different from the version Louise gives us in her book, *La Commune*, where she claims to have tackled the prosecutor head-on.<sup>11</sup> In fact, prudent Louise even denied having worn the Federal uniform: "I wore my red sash continuously from the 4th of September to the end." Once or twice during the siege, yes, she had attended a meeting in masculine attire.

She acknowledged belonging to the Labour Commission, the Aid Society for the Victims of War, the Society of Free-Thinkers, the Women's Rights group and the Garibaldi Legion.

And what about the public meetings? Well, she had chaired the meetings held by a group of women at the Justice

\* given their revolutionary and republican nature, hardly songs that would win his approval — *transl. note*



de Paix on Grand-Rue de la Chapelle. It is known as a revolutionary club, but its only goal was "to edify the masses, raise their moral tone and accustom the able-bodied among them to the idea of living by their own labours." A most reassuring club. Then she stated her own beliefs, including the necessity for "the eradication of all religious cults, and their replacement by the strictest morality with conscience as its guide. That is the rule of conduct for one and all; for me, morality amounts to acting according to one's own convictions and treating oneself and others with justice. Politically, my goal is the universal Republic, which is to be achieved through the development of the highest facilities of each individual, the eradication of evil instincts through proper education, the profound comprehension of human dignity and an educational system that is as comprehensive for women as it is for men. In other words, I call for the government of all by all. Until we can achieve even greater simplification of form, the Commune represents that government."

This is an extremely important declaration, on several counts. First, because it is dated (June 28, 1871) and gives us an idea of what the most aware Communards were thinking in the immediate aftermath of their defeat. Second, because Louise Michel was to be true to this *credo* for the rest of her life. It already shows signs of her incipient anarchist convictions: "until we can achieve even greater simplification of form..."

She told Briot that the Commune had promoted the Social Republic through measures designed to ease the daily life of the people: the abolition of excessive salaries, increased wages for women workers, and the "tied mandate"\* which bound the members of the Commune. Briot interrupted at this point, asking about the illegal arrests, the robberies... "The delegates to the Commune never ordered illegal arrests, or robberies, or pillage or arson," replied Louise. "To the best of my knowledge, everything they did was entirely legal."

She acknowledged having already been arrested twice, for taking part in demonstrations (it would have been useless to deny it). She was accused of being violent. "I'm not, but when

\* literally, "imperative mandate" (*mandat impératif*): a system of political representation under which the person elected must conform to the program which he had proclaimed during the election campaign, rather than represent the subsequent wishes of his constituency — *transl. note*

I'm attacked, I fight back. For example, during that demonstration I was just talking about, a policeman grabbed me by my hat so I hit him back."

Captain Briot wagged his finger: "Nobody may flout the law. By acting as you have done, you are guilty of having aided the criminals who spread terror, destruction and death in our unfortunate capital. What have you to say to that?" She answered, "I acted according to my conscience and my convictions."

He asked what she was living on: "Have you an income?" Louise told him she taught drawing and music as well as her regular school classes, but refused, wisely, to give him her pupils' names.

And finally, the big question, the question that must be asked of all women, for women, as everyone knows, are the mere reflections of men. "Are you married?" "No." "Have you had intimate relations with a man?" continued the prosecutor, unblushing. "No. I have but one passion: the Revolution."<sup>12</sup>

Louise dissembled throughout this first interrogation. She acknowledged only what could not be denied and dodged as best she could her adversaries' most serious charge, that of having taken up weapons against Versailles. She can hardly be blamed for this caution — quite the reverse — but she was to rewrite this bit of her personal history most thoroughly in later years.

Captain Briot, ever the conscientious policeman, went looking for witnesses. He found a seamstress, Victorine David, who gave little satisfaction: Louise was an "exalted Republican," who had made her students sing the "Marseillaise" and didn't teach them their prayers. She had last seen Louise on May 24, when she said that she was going to offer herself as prisoner in her mother's place. Victorine David knew absolutely nothing of Louise's relations with members of the Commune.<sup>13</sup> Then there was the concierge, Henriette Pierre, née Pompont, a polisher by trade, who could add little more: Louise had very few visitors and, apart from that, all she could say was that Louise was "a very good person."<sup>14</sup> Mme Josse, who owned the house at 24 Rue Oudot where Louise and her mother had been living for the past three years, could only relate street gossip: "They say Louise Michel was very exalted; they say she didn't give her students a very Christian education... But as far as I could tell, she was a very good person, very

devoted.”<sup>15</sup>

The eighteenth arrondissement's delegate to the ministry of Public Instruction, M. de Fleurville,\* ignored the possible consequences of “getting involved”: entirely at his own initiative, he sent written testimony to the Council of War about Louise Michel. This was a very courageous thing to do, for all those suspected of sympathizing with the communal movement were being actively harrassed. He praised the schoolteacher, tracing her career from the school on Rue des Cloys to the one on Rue Oudot: “Time and again, she would forgive the payment of a month's school fees by a family that was, in reality, more comfortably off than herself.” Louise spent every *sou* she had on others and sometimes she and her mother would go to bed without even a crust of bread in their stomachs. He recalled that Louise had taken in the old schoolteachers, Mlles Lhomme and Poulin, when they were sick, destitute and abandoned by everyone else. She helped everybody: unemployed workers, adults to whom she gave free literacy courses.<sup>16</sup>

Even in prison, her circumstances more reduced than ever, Louise continued to help others. She watched over a sick prisoner, since “we promised her daughter to keep an eye on her.” They would tell the daughter about her mother's condition, but in a way “not to increase the pain she already feels at their separation.”<sup>17</sup> She did her best to exonerate the members of the Montmartre women's Vigilance Committee: the committee's sole concern had been to care for children, the old, the sick and the wounded.<sup>18</sup> She was cited as a witness for the defence for Béatrix Excoffon, but not summoned to the courtroom, and so she sent her testimony in writing to the woman's lawyers: it was at her, Louise's, instigation that Béatrix, while president of the Boule-Noire Club, had called for the exchange of Commune-held prisoners for Blanqui (*not*, Louise stressed, for their execution, as was now being claimed). The motion calling for the demolition of the Vendôme Column had been similarly misrepresented: she had indeed suggested that it be melted down (along with the Bastille Column and a quantity of jewelry), but that was in order to pay the war indemnity being demanded by the Prussians.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the

\* Louise Michel had attended the wedding of Mathilde, M. de Fleurville's daughter, to the poet Verlaine — *author's note*

presidents of the clubs had not been present at the meetings at which Louise had acted as secretary, so they could not be held responsible for motions voted in their absence. Louise alone was responsible.<sup>20</sup>

She learned that Mme Richoux, convicted for having helped to erect a barricade,<sup>21</sup> had been sentenced to deportation to a fortress, and offered a word of advice to her own prosecutor, Captain Briot: "I have noticed that you wish to see justice done, and I therefore permit myself to suggest that you mistrust the denunciations now being signed by poor wretches who are only trying to gain their own liberty..."<sup>22</sup> Louise wanted to protect the women whose names had been found on the petitions calling for the creation of vocational schools, so she claimed that she herself had signed all those names, "so that the Revolution would be made for the people and by the people." As for the supposed women's brigades, the sum-total of their activity was one demonstration.<sup>23</sup>

She turned to the prison chaplain, Abbé Folley, who was devoted to all the prisoners, Catholic or not, and asked him to be her "accomplice" in a secret "worthy of the confessional." Louise wanted to protect the virtue of a certain young girl who had just been acquitted and released, and she threw herself into the project with as much concern as did the priest and the nuns. "Try to prevent her from going to visit the officers at their station. I have reason to believe that she runs a risk greater than death itself. You should be able to set the nuns at the station on guard, without exactly telling them why."<sup>24</sup>

Louise had good reason to trust Abbé Folley as she did. His willingness to play the go-between made it possible for her to correspond with Théophile Ferré. This clandestine exchange of letters between two atheist revolutionaries thanks to the good offices of a Catholic priest merely demonstrates that people of a certain nobility and worth, whatever their convictions, always recognize each other.

"Since as of today we are able to correspond with each other, my dear delegate, let my first words be ones of happiness. Let us talk." She reproached him for his antifeminist past: "I hope that you have ceased to be reactionary on the subject of women and now acknowledge their right to face both danger and death." That right, at least, they had been granted very fully indeed.<sup>25</sup> She described her arrest: "Scenes from Dante's *Inferno* or Callot's engravings pale by comparison" — and her

interrogation, where she had proclaimed her faith in the Commune, which she had served "because I sought the happiness of the people." She told him that she had said nothing in her own defence, except that she had acted "according to my conscience and my convictions." She closed her letter with a discreetly veiled word of tenderness: "Brother, shall we meet again? Shall we see our friends? But it doesn't matter... *Au revoir*, in this life or beyond it..."

The letter did run the risk of being read by a third party, but it still seems likely that it would have taken on quite another tone had there been anything between Théophile Ferré and Louise Michel other than the ties of comradeship (on his part) and platonic love (on hers). Louise couldn't let Ferré know of her great love; he was a prudish young man, this Commune delegate, and it would have shocked him a great deal.

Ferré had appeared before the Third Council of War. He had been charged with giving the order to hand General Lecomte over to the mob, setting fire to the Palace of Justice, being the author of an anonymous command to "set fire to the ministry of Finance" (which was, in fact, a forgery), and with directing the execution of hostages in the La Roquette courtyard. Many Commune members cut sorry figures before the councils of war, but Ferré defended himself with courage and dignity — or, as his enemies put it, "disgusting cynicism." His final statement before the Council of War was worthy of the man whom Louise loved, and deserves to be quoted: "I am a member of the Paris Commune and I am now in the hands of the victors. They want my head; let them take it. I shall never stoop to cowardice in an effort to save my life. I have lived a free man and I shall die the same way. I have nothing more to say. Fortune is always capricious. I entrust my memory and my vengeance to the Future." Ferré was sentenced to die on October 2. He refused to sign an appeal against the sentence.<sup>26</sup>

From her own prison cell, Louise would first try to save his life, and then dedicate herself to his memory and his vengeance.

But first his life, for there was still time. Ferré had refused to sign an appeal on his own behalf; so be it. Louise took it on herself to write to the presiding judge of the Commission of Pardons: the men of the Commune, even at risk to their own lives, had done their utmost to maintain the highest standards of "honour and security" throughout Paris. No, the Commune bore no guilt. May the blood the accusers sought to shed

rebound against them! "Ferré's execution would be an affront to all men of good conscience. The reply would be revolution!"<sup>27</sup>

But even while she tried to justify Ferré's behaviour, even as she threatened his would-be executioners with the consequences of their deed, she wanted to share his fate and join him at last, if only in death. "Let them free all those who are here by mistake; there are many such. And let them take, as they take the head of the delegate from Montmartre, the heads of all those who no longer wish to live." Now she acknowledged all her past actions, claimed her full responsibility: "I was much more a soldier than an ambulance nurse. I have the right to die, and I claim it."<sup>28</sup>

Once again through the good offices of Abbé Folley, Louise managed to send Ferré a little cloth carnation (which she cut from her own red sash) and a poem:

*Si j'allais au noir cimetière,  
Frères, jetez sur votre soeur  
Comme une espérance dernière  
De rouges oeilleux tout en fleur...*

She recalled that, under the Empire, this flower had been the symbol of hope and renewal for all republicans:

*Aujourd'hui, va fleurir dans l'ombre  
Des noires et tristes prisons.  
Va fleurir près du captif sombre  
Et dis-lui que nous l'aimons...*

The word\* had been spoken at last, but perhaps she meant nothing more than the collective and fraternal love of comrades-in-arms:

*Dis-lui par le temps rapide  
Tout appartient à l'avenir,  
Que le vainqueur au front livide  
Plus que le vaincu peut mourir.*<sup>29</sup>

Théophile's reply to this sentimental farewell was a calm and measured letter "to *citoyenne* Louise Michel, prisoner of State." He did, though, give his correspondent the pleasure of receiving from him a quotation from one of her own poems:

*Et nous dans nos rouges bannières  
Enveloppons-nous pour mourir.  
L.M. (Chants des morts)*

\* i.e. "Nous l'aimons," we love him — *transl. note*

"I received your charming souvenir and I read with great interest your tender verse..." Ferré knew his situation, and he took it calmly. "Those who have sacrificed their lives to a great cause, as we have done, are strengthened by that act. Nothing can surprise or disturb us." He then offered a political analysis of the current situation. "The very intensity with which the victors are hounding their powerless adversaries is a sign of their own weakness." It meant that one must not lose hope. "Ideas gain ground in direct proportion to the degree of persecution brought to bear upon their supporters. They can't kill every last socialist, there are too many of us... And all those who survive will have become ardent disciples of the idea... So, the future is ours." After all these abstractions, he turned to Louise's own plight. Why had they not yet brought her before the "charming" councils of war? Why the delay? Then some advice. "Allow me to ask that you take good care of yourself, contrary to your usual habits. Don't allow our enemies to gain the impression that their prisons can harm you... Sincerely yours, dear *citoyenne*, and in devotion to Equality."<sup>30</sup> That was the tone of the letters that Louise received in her prison cell from the man she loved. I can almost see her reading and rereading those letters, trying to find between the lines some suggestion of personal feeling on the part of this young man of twenty-five for her, a woman of forty, and instead finding only the concern that might be expressed to any valued comrade. Nothing more.

With Abbé Folley's help, the correspondence was able to continue. Louise to Théophile, September 16, 1871, midnight: "To citizen Ferré."

*Valsez, valsez comme des folles.*

*Pauvres feuilles, valsez, valsez...*

"That refrain was going round and round in my head this morning. I've always liked that waltz very much, but now it breaks my heart." She knew she might be taking liberties in writing to him a second time, but would he please answer, if possible. She was a materialist, rationalist and atheist, but she was a mystic as well and she told Théophile of her dreams and premonitions. "I am now quite sure that I was not mistaken when I couldn't tell who was speaking to me about you, soul to soul." Which was reality, dreams or waking life? Passing time or eternity? "I have always thought that we could sense our destiny, as dogs can sense the presence of the wolf [her old

obsession], and sometimes what we have sensed in that confused way then comes, with strange exactitude, to pass." She told him about her experience the night she had stood guard in Montmartre cemetery. She would never forget that night, rich in portents, when life and death had met in the eternity of the instant. Louise wanted to believe in "a higher life," a supreme justice "that will not permit you, the only one whose spirit is as great as our cause, to be sacrificed..." She was very calm, she told him. She was affected by nothing but her separation from her mother and the anxiety this caused her. Why did he not describe for her his prison life? As she had once reproached Hugo, long ago: "Am I not enough of a sister to you that you might share your soul with me, as I have shared mine with you?" Then she reined herself in, after this near-declaration: "I won't reread this letter, for if I did I probably wouldn't send it. I'll keep writing instead." And she talked about New Caledonia.\* What a beautiful trip it would be, with Ferré as companion. "We'd set sail in a winter storm," "the huge ship's sails swollen by the wind." Then: "but for all that to come to pass, you must live." Otherwise, she too wished only "the calm sleep of the dead."

Prisoners' imaginations often run riot; hers was no exception. Her childhood came back to her, a dream to counterpoint reality. "I could see the great oak forests of Haute-Marne, the old tumbledown chateau where I was raised and where I heard the wolves [again] howl in winter and the nightingales sing in summer." She interrupted her letter once again, this time to listen to "the spirit which speaks to me of you and which says, as I say, you must not die..."<sup>31</sup> All this sentimentality must have exasperated its recipient. We can never know.

She complained of the chattering women who surrounded her: "There are times when I'd like to knock their heads together." How many more martyrs will it take before "the masses are ready for liberty?" She worried about Ferré's health. Was it true he was ill? But he must live, for the cause. She sent him the works of Thucydides. And the advice "of a wise elder sister": "Did you notice all the legal errors in your cursed trial?"<sup>32</sup>

\* an island in the South-west Pacific used by France as a penal colony — *transl. note*



She churned out an avalanche of letters and petitions — the only steps open to her in a prison cell — in her effort to save her beloved. She told Abbé Folley, "Ferré is neither a criminal nor an arsonist." She lied, quite deliberately: she later told her anarchist companion Girault that Ferré was indeed present at the murder of those hostages, there was even a photograph which showed him levelling his revolver.<sup>33</sup> (But which was the lie, the account she gave the priest or the one she gave Girault?) She wrote the newspapers: "He resisted all provocations, all traps..." But she wondered if there was still a press worthy of the name? "Is there anywhere in this dead city a paper which will publish the words of the category of dead known as 'prisoners'? Let there be no executions, or let them kill us all." She wrote to Mme Jules Simon: "I am sure you do not agree with this coldblooded cruelty. I loved you... May your husband's name not be identified with what is now taking place." She sent Marie Ferré to Victor Hugo, with a letter of introduction: Ferré "is the finest of us all, the most generous in triumph and the most dignified in defeat. That is why they have sentenced him to death. Save him, it would not be the first time you had cheated the gallows of its intended victim, nor will it be the last. Time is running out. I leave this in your hands." She appealed again to Abbé Folley: "Help us, I beg of you. For me, Ferré is the Revolution itself, merciful in victory and proud in defeat. All that I have seen of him is so great that I would give my own life a thousand times over for his." She asked the priest to pass on to Ferré, along with the Thucydides, a sketch of an ivy leaf, a significant plant for prisoners, representing as it does remembrance and faithfulness. She also asked him to keep, for Ferré, a drawing she had done of the gloomy chateau of Vroncourt.

Victor Hugo replied to her appeal and she pressed her case all the harder: "Since you are called to be the great conciliator after the slaughter, since you wish to mediate this terrible struggle, you undoubtedly already know the only course that is worthy both of you and of us... Let there be no coldblooded executions to follow those done in the heat of battle, or let them kill us all..." At the same time, she pleaded for the release of the victims of false arrest. Let them deport "fanatics" like Ferré and herself, but let the innocent go free.<sup>34</sup>

She finally received an answer from Ferré, calm and reasonable as usual — a bit banal, in fact, not that it matters.

He thanked her for the description of her own arrest and expressed his relief that she had escaped the great slaughter. "Had the conquerors known that their prisoner was *citoyenne* Louise Michel, a dangerous enemy because she is a woman who will never waver in her convictions, then I am certain that I should never have had the satisfaction of making contact with you once again." (But, as we know, the officers to whom Louise surrendered in order to save her mother were well aware of her identity.) Fortunately, she had been spared, and a number of men "of courage and intelligence" had been spirited away to safety, so there was still hope for the future. "We have been beaten, but we shall have our revenge. And if not we, in person, then our brothers. What importance has it then, that I, for one, will not be present?" She was to take heart: "I beg you, let there be no traces in your future letters of the melancholy and sensitivity which seems to have taken possession of your spirit." Rather than brooding on the defeat, she was to recognize, as he did, that "socialism has never been more essential than it is now" and there were now too many republicans in France for the monarchy ever to be re-established, in any form whatsoever. "If my predictions are correct, those who survive the next few years will see very great changes take place. I hope that you number among them." He thanked her for the poem and the red carnation. That "charming gesture" had touched him a great deal and, in return, he sent her "his head" — that is, a photograph, with the inscription, "To *citoyenne* Louise Michel, in memory of a Communard." He couldn't have been more formally correct. But he did add a few words of advice concerning her own eventual appearance before the councils of war, words that show he rather feared the possible consequences of Louise's habitual state of exaltation. "I have no worry for your principles, but I should like to make these few observations. Force yourself to be calm enough to defeat their schemes; above all, beware your own generosity. Generosity has been severely devalued in our day, and it would make you its victim. The interests of our cause require that its supporters be at liberty; you can behave correctly, without being naive..." In short, she should do everything possible to get out of "this trap" as quickly as possible. To the person who had sent him the Thucydides, he sent this letter. Had she received it? "Sincerely yours and for Equality."<sup>35</sup>

She was thrilled by this letter. It was reasoned and calm, but he did show some interest in her, at least as a militant for the same cause. "Brother, thank you. I am very happy. I promise to follow your advice."<sup>36</sup>

The correspondence continued, always thanks to the priest. "He understands that there can be no exchange of ideas between the other female prisoners and myself. They have the usual strengths and weaknesses of womankind, and that is exactly what I do not have." She told him about the "ridiculous things these worthy prisoners of State are saying." Their well-intentioned minds were full of such nonsense "that their accusers should be ashamed of charging them with political activism." Just as George Sand showered contempt on the women of 1848, Pauline Roland, Jeanne Deroin, Eugénie Niboyet, so Louise Michel wanted to set herself apart from the other women of the Commune. She thought herself, because of her intelligence, closer to Ferré than to the other women. Not that intelligence is the way to make oneself loved, quite the contrary, but it is a common delusion of plain intelligent women. And sentimental, one might add: "I have promised myself, dear prisoner of ours [that discreet pronoun], not to write you in the dark moments when the soul is especially burdened. But I love these dark nights, I feel this is when I live most intensely and so I send you my thoughts." (This whole tone must have irritated Ferré a great deal.) Then she pulled back to less dangerous ground. Her interrogation, she told him, had been "very benevolent." She had told them that Ferré, far from being the assassin and arsonist of their official condemnation, in fact had tried to prevent the murders and the fires. That day, as Captain Briot had escorted her to the door "with certain signs of consideration," she was sure she had seen (or perhaps just imagined) tears in his eyes.<sup>37</sup>

She learned that there would be no review of Ferré's trial. Like a wasp furiously buzzing at the windowpane, she sat in her cell and pressed her campaign on his behalf even more intensely than before. To free him, she accused herself. She told the Commission of Pardons that it was she who had wanted revenge for the murdered prisoners, the ambulance nurses who were raped before being killed; she who had suggested to Ferré that they blow up the buildings that had been retaken by the Versaillaise, that they fight on the ramparts to the bitter end, that they execute the hostages. But Ferré had replied, she told

them, that "crimes against humanity would be a sign of cowardice on the part of the Commune and as long as he still stood, they would not be committed. We had a long and heated argument. His last words were an attempt to stave off the executions, which would only damn our cause for the future without saving it for the present." And then a cry straight from the heart: "I am more guilty than he..."<sup>38</sup> She again begged Abbé Folley to proclaim Ferré's innocence, since in all of "dead, cowardly" Paris there was no-one else to raise a voice in his defence. "They might listen to you. There is still time."<sup>39</sup> She wrote Hugo, enclosing copies of the letters she had sent to the judges. He was her last hope: "Now that republicans are being executed by the Republic and Paris is mute since there isn't a spirit left alive in the whole slaughterhouse," let Hugo be the one to proclaim aloud that it was now the turn of the revolutionary women to be silenced. Why wouldn't they take her to trial? Why wouldn't they deport the revolutionaries? Why wouldn't they set the innocent free? She shook with rage and shame: "Dear Master, I don't know how I manage to write this letter..." Her mind swayed under the pressures of her emotions: "Should they commit these unspeakable deeds, O Revolution my love, I shall avenge you and there will never have been such vengeance."<sup>40</sup> She even wrote to Toulain, the engraver who had been elected deputy for the Seine and who had then condemned the Commune. She would take no steps to save herself, but she would do anything, even this, to save Ferré. And so she flattered and cajoled this man for whom she could in fact have felt nothing but contempt. "It would be a great act on your part were you to help us now." She gave him Victor Hugo's address (then living with Paul Meurice), so that they might make contact.<sup>41</sup>

Having done what she could to reach every level of French society with her appeal, she now called on all the nations of the world, "in the name of civilization,"<sup>42</sup> to protest the intended executions. Then she threatened M. Thiers himself: "I warn you that should a single execution take place, certain documents obtained from your home and other sources will immediately be released to the public, with full and appropriate publicity."<sup>43</sup> Louise had discussed these supposedly incriminating documents with a fellow-prisoner, a certain Mme Leroy. Louise's great confidence, however, had this time been misplaced, for Mme Leroy had not only been the mistress of a member of the

Commune (Urbain) but simultaneously of a Versailles agent as well (Barral de Montaud). The woman told the authorities all about these documents during her interrogation: "Fortunately, her information was incorrect."<sup>44</sup> Louise, who knew nothing of all this, asked Abbé Folley to supply Me Ducoudray, the lawyer, with a copy of the letters she had sent M. Thiers; she hoped to convince the chief of state that her threat was a serious matter. Publishing these documents would only be the start of a "terrible revenge."<sup>45</sup> Did those documents really exist? If they did, they were so very carefully hidden away that they've never since been found. So we can never know if Louise had a real weapon in her hands, or if it was all a last, desperate bluff.

Yet this storm of action (for the letters were a form of action, after all) wasn't enough for Louise. Ever since childhood, Louise had used poetry as the spillway for the torrents of disgust, indignation and despair that sometimes overwhelmed her. And so:

*Sur le cadran brisé, sinistres sont les jours,  
Passez, passez, passez, passez toujours.  
Emportez tout, les haines, les amours.  
Tout est fini, les forts, les braves,  
Tous sont tombés, O mes amis...*

And yet,

*Nous reviendrons, foule sans nombre  
Nous viendrons par tous les chemins.*<sup>46</sup>

In another poem, she savaged Versailles, "that old whore," with its unchecked appetite for prisons, soldiers and pretty girls, while

*La ville où bat le coeur du monde,  
Paris dort du sommeil des morts.*<sup>47</sup>

She passed solemn judgment on the members of the Councils of War, the men responsible for Ferré's death sentence:

*Cassaigne, Mauguet, Guibert, Berlin, bourreau,  
Gaveau, Gaveau*

*Léger, Gaulet, Labat, taïaut, taïut...*

But take care, for "the dead are quickly mounting," their number becomes so great:

*Vous ne voyez pas sur le seuil  
L'avenir qui déchire l'ombre...*<sup>48</sup>

She rages,

*Laissez-nous partir tous ensemble  
Dans les tempêtes de l'hiver...*

And she warns that they must all be exiled, or all be killed. Let the victors make no mistake:

*Que si vous en frappez un seul,  
Il faudra, poursuivant vos crimes,  
Sur tous étendre le linceul...<sup>49</sup>*

For, if not:

*La mer des révolutions  
Vous emportera dans sa crue...<sup>50</sup>*

*Car toujours nous renaîtrons, et toujours nous reviendrons:  
Passons, passons les mers, passons les noirs vallons,  
Passons, que les blés murs tombent dans les sillons.<sup>51</sup>*

This idea of the eternal cycle of death and rebirth runs through all her poetry. It was the bedrock of her faith. The individual may perish, but is born again in all men: as the seed must die to give us the kernel, the kernel must be broken to give us the grain, the grain must be ground to give us bread; as the grape must be crushed to give us wine. These are old, simple, universal images, the images of man as part of nature. Louise would cling to them, use them, throughout her entire life, as her credo of the Revolution which is itself both destruction and a new beginning. "If the grain didn't die..."

## VII - THE VERDICT

Though Louise was preoccupied with the fate of the defeated Commune partisans in general, and that of Ferré in particular, she had still her own role to play. Captain Briot did not call her for a second interrogation until September 19. By then, Ferré had been condemned to death, so she had nothing more to lose but her own life and no desire to save it. At this interrogation, then, no more evasions or distortions. If anything, she swung to the opposite extreme. Though she had previously insisted that her only work had been that of an ambulance nurse, in fact she was a soldier of the Commune as well. "Were you not wounded in a skirmish with the forces of order?" asked Captain Briot. "Once I slipped while running into a gulley to save a wounded National Guard and suffered a sprain. That incident must have led to the reports that I had been injured."

"According to police reports, you took part in the fighting in Asnières and in Neuilly," continued the captain. "I fought at Issy, Clamart and Montmartre," "What were your weapons?" "At Issy, I used a sabre to rally the Federals. In Clamart, I took a dead man's gun and in Montmartre, I found a gun on the ground."

"Did you belong to the International?" "Yes. [This is by no means certain, since Louise was now ready to accuse herself of any charge they wanted to suggest.] But there is no point questioning me further on this subject; I shall not answer."<sup>1</sup>

Louise was fortunate: she lived in that brief moment be-

tween the abolition of torture in all civilized countries (at the end of the 18th century) and its re-introduction. Our contemporary world has greatly improved on the traditional methods, but Captain Briot, in his world, would have considered himself dishonoured by any attempt to "make his prisoners talk." Louise had a great deal of respect for this captain. After her interrogation, she wrote him a note: "You are an honest man, so try to do the honest things: set free the ones who are suffering (the innocent) and send the rest of us, the fanatics, into exile." He was already aware of her song, "Les Vengeurs" (which had been introduced into evidence against her); now she sent him their "Chant de mort ou de départ" (which was even more damning). And finally, she begged him to pay absolutely no attention to any interventions being attempted on her behalf.<sup>2</sup>

For Louise was becoming a figure of great importance in the continuing trials. She had figured — unbeknownst to herself — in the September 3 trial of the *pétroleuses*. By and large, they were poor, ignorant and unsophisticated women, quite incapable of defending themselves in any way other than by simply denying the charges brought against them. The public prosecutor for their trial, Captain Jouenne, summed up his indictment with a general condemnation of this attempt by women to play a role in history and a quite particular condemnation of Louise Michel. "...Some of these women, and I reluctantly allow them the dignity of the title, cannot be excused on the grounds of ignorance. They are schoolteachers, they cannot pretend to be unaware of the concepts of good and evil..." And among those schoolteachers, he singled out "that Michel woman," who took the hymns out of the schools and brought in the "Marseillaise" and the "Chant du départ".\* Her trial, therefore, would be of the greatest importance.<sup>3</sup>

News travels slowly in prison, so it was not until two months later that Louise learned of this calumny. She took up her pen once again, this time in her own defence, and wrote the president of the Fourth Council of War, Colonel Gaillard, demanding that her trial begin. "Colonel, the indictment in the Réitiffe affair\*\* constitutes a serious personal affront. You

\* damning evidence indeed. Consider this chorus from "Le Chant du départ":  
The Republic calls us We must conquer or die A Frenchman must live for  
the Republic For Her he must die.

\*\* Elizabeth Réitiffe, one of the women tried collectively for arson on September 3 — *transl. notes*



cannot be unaware of the terms in which [Captain Jouenne] spoke of 'that Michel woman' who has yet to appear before you, whose case is of such paramount importance..."<sup>4</sup> Two days later, she sent Lieutenant Seriot a copy of all her declarations. "Even should their response be to transfer me to another prison, I am counting on you to make sure that these declarations are entered in my dossier. They may kill me if they wish, but they may not blacken my reputation."<sup>5</sup>

She received no reply, but she was indeed transferred to the Arras prison. The reasons for this transfer are not clear, though she claims in her *Mémoires* that her correspondence with Ferré had been discovered and, as a consequence, the prefecture of police had demanded her transfer.<sup>6</sup> She added, in her book *La Commune*, "I have now learned that old Clément was behind this infamy."<sup>7</sup> And perhaps, too, it was the affair of the supposed "documents" with which she had threatened to compromise M. Thiers.

Whatever the reasons for the transfer, Louise objected to it: "I have the right to stay here in Versailles (where I can receive visits from my mother) while awaiting my appearance before the Council of War, to which I also have a right." She had been publicly insulted; she demanded therefore the right to defend herself in public, "even if the judges shrink from the inconvenience of being faced by a woman who is truly devoted to the Commune and its cause." Anyway, one day she would be judged "by the people." And above everything else, she wished it to be quite clear that she was not one of those women who would buy their freedom by making convenient declarations or by serving as police spies. (An allusion to Mme Leroy and the "documents." Louise says, "I was quite aware of her intrigues, but for a long time I refused to believe it." Yet she doesn't even mention this whole business in her *Mémoires*.) So now she demanded a cell in Versailles and "judgment or death; both if you wish."<sup>8</sup> She wrote General Appert as well, along the same lines.<sup>9</sup>

It wasn't that she was being ill-treated in her new prison. She even thought "the black sisters\* very agreeable. It's just that I'd rather be with the ones whom I already know. I shall never agree with them, but I shall always love them." Indeed, in all her prisons, Louise would always get along very well with

\* i.e. the nuns — *transl. note*

these women who, like herself, had chosen to serve an Absolute — even if it was not the same one. The nuns reciprocated. They always found Louise had a beneficial effect on the other prisoners. Yet Louise arrived in Arras in a state of despair: "Prisons and death are nothing, it's the anxiety about the fate of others..." She turned once again to Abbé Folley, asked him to tell her mother\* how she was getting on.

Louise raged at the delays, yet the wheels were all the while turning in their own slow and tortuous way. Captain Briot, being an exceedingly conscientious man, was doing the best he could to understand the strange personality before him. The mayor of Vroncourt was contacted, who recalled that Louise had been very carefully raised by Mme Demahis herself. "In her Vroncourt days, she was a very devoted girl. Really, she always conducted herself in such a manner as to win public esteem."<sup>11</sup> The Chaumont public prosecutor also sent testimony: she had received a "good education," many of her poems had been published in the local papers but "they weren't at all political." Indeed, "no proceedings, political or otherwise, were ever brought against this young lady."<sup>12</sup> The mayors of the different municipalities where Louise had taught school all said much the same thing, and made no reference at all to the malicious gossip of which Louise claimed to have been the target. In Audeloncourt, she "taught the young girls and was herself a model of good conduct. She enjoyed general public esteem."<sup>13</sup> The mayor of Clefmont noted that she had indeed written some poetry but no reproach could be brought against her morals or her integrity. Still, he added, they'd always thought her something of a "daydreamer."<sup>14</sup> The mayor of Millières wrote: "To my knowledge, she did not, during her stay in this municipality, publish anything of a political nature." True, she had sent poems to Victor Hugo, one of them concerning "the death of Mgr Affre on a barricade." The mayor was wrong, for Louise had written about the death of a different monseigneur entirely, Mgr. Sibour, who was killed by a priest in the church of Saint-Etienne-du-Mont. He added, however, that Louise Michel did have the reputation of suffering from a "vivid and somewhat exalted imagination."<sup>15</sup>

Despite the innocuous nature of this testimony, Captain

\* who was staying with her cousin, Léon Galès, a shirtmaker at 164-166 Rue Saint-Honoré, facing the Louvre — *author's note*<sup>10</sup>

Briot slowly came to the conclusion that "Louise Michel had done at least as much as the members of the Commune, particularly Ferré, whom she defends energetically and for whom she has too much esteem for us to suppose that nothing of a serious or intimate nature ever took place between them." He had now established her participation in the attack on the legitimate government and in the call to civil war. But he did not yet know the extent of her role in the events of March 18 and in the assassinations of Generals Lecomte and Thomas. He therefore ordered the police superintendent to determine the degree of her participation in the Rue des Rosiers committee, her behaviour during their meetings, her role in the revolutionary clubs and, finally, her relations with Ferré.<sup>16</sup>

In vain. The superintendent discovered nothing.<sup>17</sup>

A patient man, Captain Briot interrogated his witnesses once again. Mme Josse, the proprietor, suddenly remembered that Louise Michel, dressed as a National Guard, had spent the night of March 17-18 on La Butte-Montmartre. "I met her mother the next day in the street. She was crying, she said she had gone looking for her daughter on the Butte, but Louise wouldn't listen to her." Mme Josse knew nothing about the assassination of the generals, "but I think Louise Michel was very influential in the National Guard, both in action and in political developments in Montmartre." And she also remembered having seen those pictures of Louise bearing the inscription, "Ferré's mistress."<sup>18</sup>

Mlle Emilie Potin, a painter, had only one thing to tell them: she'd done Louise favours (taught in her stead, once, for six weeks) and then Louise had turned around and denounced her brother, Jules Potin, for shirking his duty as a National Guard. It had been very painful. Apart from that, well...she'd heard that Louise Michel would wave to the crowds from a carriage just as if she were a queen: "She's an arrogant woman who was probably trying to win some glory for her name." Ferré? "I don't think she ever had relations with that member of the Commune, or any other man. Her conduct was acceptable enough, even if her style of dress left something to be desired."<sup>19</sup>

The concierge, Henriette Pompont, could also now dredge up some damning memories. "She spent the nights of March 17 and 18 away from home and then she came back dressed as a National Guard. I never saw her carry a weapon, however. She

did mention to me once that if M. Clemenceau had arrived at Rue des Rosiers just instants sooner the generals wouldn't have been killed, because the mayor opposed their execution and that was because he sided with Versailles." The concierge, Rue des Rosiers, didn't know what Louise had done, "but in my soul and my conscience, I believe she was probably mixed up in it [the assassinations], because she had a very exalted temperament and she was always one of the leaders of whatever was going on."

"But why didn't you question her further?" asked Captain Briot. "Oh, she was never in the same place two moments running. You never dreamed of trying to hold a conversation with her." "Had she intemperate habits?" continued the captain. "No, though she was always drinking black coffee." As for any friendships or liaisons, the only people who came to Louise's apartment were her students' parents. Henriette Pompont knew nothing about Louise Michel and Théophile Ferré.

"And the hostages?" "I heard her say," replied the concierge, "that unless they turned Blanqui over to the Commune, the priests would be killed." Then, for her grand climax, Mme Pompont returned to the subject of the generals' deaths: "If Louise Michel was there when they killed those generals, then she would have been one of the people urging them on. She was far too exalted to have tried to prevent the crime."<sup>20</sup>

Louise's assistant schoolmistress, Malvina Poulain (described for whatever curious reasons as a "street pedlar" in the report), declared that Louise had never taken her into her confidence, but that she could say Louise didn't receive men in her apartment. She thought the rumours about Louise's relationship with Ferré highly unlikely. "People always said she fought as hard as a man."<sup>21</sup>

Captain Briot listened to all these statements, and was particularly interested in what the concierge had had to say about Georges Clemenceau. He asked the head of the Sûreté to order a new inquiry. They would have to hurry, however, for he had been told "to wrap up this important affair."<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Louise paced her Arras cell. What was happening to Ferré? "No newspapers, no news of any kind." A torn fragment of a paper fell into her hands, its date and headline ripped away, which described Satory Plain, scene of

Ferré's execution. "No! It can't be! They wouldn't dare!..." Her rising anger was mingled with despair and threats of vengeance: "Very well, gentlemen, if you have indeed done this, I swear to you, I'll invite Dante to invent your fate." And then, in a mixture of courage and tenderness: "It's nothing to take one's own death lightly. But the death of others..."<sup>23</sup>

The night of November 26-27, almost as if by some premonition, Louise was unable to sleep. "Oh, storm of the night! A sinister wind blows through my window, speak to me, are you the voice of the dead or of the future?" And then, the cry of a woman in love: "O tempest, when one is on the very steps of the gallows, how one loves!"<sup>24</sup> Her emotions found relief in verse as well, and she wrote this poem attacking the republic that was no better than the Empire had been:

*Ce fantôme de République  
Qui frappe ses plus fiers enfants,  
Va voir sur la place publique  
Les Bonaparte triomphants...*

The Bonapartes, in triumphant return, would destroy  
*Nous et l'homme de Transnonain.*<sup>\*25</sup>

The terrible November days when Ferré, Rossel and Bourgeois all awaited their end: Ferré with dignity, Rossel with grandeur, Bourgeois with courage. The condemned men were awakened early in the morning of November 28, and given time to write their final messages. Rossel wrote to his parents, his sisters and his grandmother. Ferré, in the adjoining cell, wrote to his sister Marie and to Louise.

"To Marie Ferré, Tuesday, November 28, 1871, five-thirty in the morning. My dear sister, I am about to die; your face will be the last image in my mind. I beg you to ask for my body and to reunite it in death with that of our unfortunate mother. If you can, please put a notice in the papers about the interment so that friends may attend. No religious ceremonies, of course; I die a materialist, as I have lived... Try to nurse our brother back to health and console our father. Tell them both how very much I love them. I embrace you with my whole heart and thank you all for all the attention you have lavished on me. Do not let yourself grieve... I am happy: my sufferings will end, and I have no cause to complain." Then a postscript, which

\* Thiers was the "man of Rue Transmonain" for, as minister of the Interior, he was responsible for the savage repression of Paris workers in 1834, during the reign of Louise-Philippe — *transl. note*

directed that his personal belongings be returned to her and his money distributed to the most needy of the other prisoners.<sup>26</sup>

Ferré next wrote to Louise. "Six o'clock. Dear *citoyenne*, I shall soon take my leave of all those who have been dear to me and who have shown me their affection... It would be remiss of me not to tell you now of the esteem I have for your character and your great generosity. You are more fortunate than I, you will yet enjoy better days and the triumph of the ideas for which I have made the total sacrifice. Farewell, dear *citoyenne*, I shake your hand in fraternity. Your devoted Th. Ferré, on his last day."<sup>27</sup>

Little enough, and yet it was to Louise that Ferré addressed his last letter. We know already that he was no literary stylist, that emotion was never allowed to break through the measured calm of his sentences. Ferré probably did feel for Louise great respect and friendship, but nothing resembling the great love which she bore for him and of which he must surely have been aware.

Everything was now ready for the horrors which Louise had so long been dreading. Three police vans left the prison of Versailles shortly before seven o'clock, with Rossel and the priest, Passa, in the first, Sergeant Bourgeois and Abbé Folley in the second, and Ferré in the third, all alone.

Six thousand soldiers had gathered on Satory Plain for this great military and patriotic ceremony. The three condemned men climbed their three gallows and had kerchiefs tied over their eyes. At the last moment, Ferré pulled his off and stared at the men about to kill him.

"Fire!"

Rossel was dead, the others had to be dispatched. A dog appeared from nowhere to lick Ferré's face.

The next day, Louise was returned from Arras to Versailles. At the police station she saw Marie, who had come to claim her brother's body, and the women were able to exchange a few words.<sup>28</sup> So. It had happened. "At least," wrote Louise, "there was one brave enough not to beg his butchers for mercy... He did well. He saved the honour of the Revolution."<sup>29</sup> But she asked herself bitterly, "Why was there only one protest demonstration, attended by a few students, and in commemoration of Rossel alone? [She was wrong: there had been mass demonstrations honouring Ferré as well.] How can Paris allow her deputies to be slaughtered like this? Are

Parisians afraid "they'll compromise themselves?"<sup>30</sup> She wrote General Appert once again, in the most provocative language at her disposal: "I am slowly coming to believe that the triple assassination of last Tuesday morning really did take place. If you want to pass judgment on me, you have quite enough information in hand. I am ready, and Satory Plain is near. You all know full well that if I leave this place alive, I shall avenge the martyrs, Long live the Commune!"<sup>31</sup> She wanted to die. "Nobody, who has not experienced this great emptiness himself, can imagine what courage it takes to go on living."<sup>32</sup> This courage now failed her. Louise had become a desperate, human, vulnerable woman.

But fortunately, the interrogations began once again. Now she could confront her enemies, answer them and fight — not for her own skin, but for the cause which she and Ferré had both defended and which was now the only thing left to her. This time, she gave a full account of her revolutionary action; in fact, a fuller account than strict truth would have required.

Yes, she'd been present when the generals were arrested. "I shouted, 'Don't let them go!' But I never thought for a single moment that they would die. It's just that I was furious that they had given an order to fire on the people."

She didn't remember having been in the house on Rue des Rosiers during their executions. "But I remember saying to members of the Vigilance Committee, and to Ferré among others, because he disapproved of that kind of violence, 'They died well.'"

Yes, she had fully intended to assassinate Thiers and it was Ferré who had changed her mind. "I wanted to terrify the Assembly and bring an end to the fighting. I was convinced that Thiers was the heart and soul of that struggle." (Louise exalted tyrannicide throughout her life.)

Yes, she had chaired the revolutionary club which met originally on Grand-Rue de la Chapelle, Justice de Paix and later in the church of Saint-Bernard. And who had chaired the meetings when she was away being an ambulance nurse? "Different people."

She had issued various policy statements, whose expressions sometimes became a bit twisted in the transmission. Yes, that was her text which had been published in *Le Cri du Peuple*, May 15, 1871, concerning public worship, the magistracy and hostages. But she had not suggested the hostages be executed,

she had written only of "the threat" to execute hostages.

And what about the "fireworks" in her draft article, *L'Ombre*? "Come forth from your grave, O Republic. Come see the whore being passed off in your name... Let the wicked rejoice in this infamous peace... Rejoice, light your fireworks; we shall light ours..."<sup>33</sup> Louise explained, "I meant that death and destruction was preferable to such infamy."

Briot learned that conventional morality did not guide Louise Michel. "When I was writing my various manifestos, I almost always attached to them the names of good working-class women so that these women would be associated with ideas about education and the dignity of woman." "But that's extremely serious. Those forgeries seriously compromised those women." "That never occurred to me. I never thought those women would end up in court just for that."

Louise's political naiveté is obvious and so is the reason why she worked so hard to exonerate these women: it was her thoughtlessness which had incriminated them in the first place.

As for the famous fires: "I proposed that we dig ourselves in and fight to the death."

Louise also took responsibility for the manifesto of the central committee of the Union of Women for the Defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded — even though, in fact, the group had been founded and run by Marx's friend, Elizabeth Dmitrieff. Either Louise wanted to give herself a little extra importance or she was trying to shield the others. Or both.

She was already the subject of myth-making. "Did you not once ride in a funeral procession in a carriage which was drawn not by horses, but by some National Guards?" "I would never have permitted that. If I was in a carriage at all, it was because I had a game leg."

And the denunciations she had been accused of making? "I denounced one friend [Jules Potin], whom I had already warned, and only because I knew nothing would happen to him."

Finally, she had never been anybody's mistress. Ferré was an "indomitable" revolutionary for whom she had felt only great trust and affection.<sup>34</sup>

Louise also trusted this captain who had been interrogating her over the months and so she asked him, since he would be the one to prepare her charge-sheet, "to do something that would in no way violate his conscience," namely: to leave



the Demahis name out of this whole business, "for it would just invite *Le Figaro* to go raking through old family history." Her own life, however, was an open book.<sup>35</sup> Captain Briot granted her request. The name "Demahis" was never pronounced during the entire trial.<sup>36</sup>

On December 10, Briot submitted his findings.<sup>37</sup> On December 16, at long last, Louise Michel came before the Fourth Council of War. She was dressed entirely in black, as usual, and she threw back her veil with an abrupt gesture, to stare fixedly at the assembled judges. Louise was a great actress: her role for this court martial was that of the Revolution Incarnate, and she played it extremely well. Perfectly in command of herself, she refused the assistance of the court-appointed lawyer, Me Haussmann, and listened impassively to the reading of the charges brought against her: membership in the International (doubtful), presence on Rue des Rosiers when the generals were killed (also doubtful), responsibility for the organization of the Union of Women (false), participation in the motions voted by the revolutionary club and participation in the armed struggle.

Her sole motivation: pride. As in the case of Rossel, the military judges could find no other explanation for revolutionary action aimed at destroying such an admirable society.

"She was an illegitimate child raised by acts of charity, yet, instead of thanking Providence which had granted her an above-average education and the means to live in peace with her mother, she instead gave free rein to her exalted imagination, her difficult character. Having broken all ties with her benefactors [naturally enough, since they were dead], she went to Paris, seeking adventure... She had close connections with the members of the Commune and was kept well-informed of all their plans. She helped them wholeheartedly and to the full extent of her powers; she often went even further than they did..." And then came the words that must have filled her with savage pride and despair: "She is as guilty as Ferré," "the proud Republican" whom she defended so stubbornly and whose death, to borrow her own words, "would be an affront to all men of good conscience and answered by revolution."

Louise therefore was charged with: first, criminal attempt to overthrow the government; second, incitement to civil war; third, having borne arms and a uniform in an insurrectional movement and having made use of those arms; fourth, written

fraud, at her own initiative; fifth, the use of a false document; sixth, complicity in the assassination of hostages; seventh, complicity in illegal arrests, these being crimes provided for in articles 87, 91, 150, 151, 59, 60, 302, 34 and 344 of the Penal Code and article 5 of the Law of May 24, 1834.<sup>38</sup>

Louise listened without emotion except for one momentary flicker of a smile. "What have you to say in your defence?" asked the presiding judge.

"I don't wish to defend myself; I don't wish to be defended. I am devoted to the Social Revolution and I declare that I accept full responsibility for all my actions. I do this entirely, and without reservation. You charge me with participation in the assassination of generals? To that I reply: had I been present in Montmartre when they ordered the soldiers to fire on the people, I would not have hesitated a moment to fire on those who would give such orders. Once they were prisoners, however, I would never countenance their being shot. It would be an act of cowardice.

"As for the fires, the arson: yes, I was involved. I wanted to throw up a barrier of flames between ourselves and the Versailles invaders. I had no accomplices. I acted of my own accord.

"It is also charged that I aided the Commune. That is entirely true, for the Commune's highest goal was the Social Revolution, and the Social Revolution is the dearest of my ideals. I did all I could do to promote the Commune, but the Commune played no role — and you know it full well — in either the assassinations or the arson. I attended every one of their meetings in City Hall [false: Louise was on the battlefield] and I declare that there was never any discussion of assassination or of arson."

And now Louise was truly provocative: "Would you like to know who was really guilty? The police. Perhaps some day what really happened will be revealed, but it's obvious that for now the supporters of the Social Revolution will be blamed... But I'll not defend myself, I've already told you that. You are to judge me, you sit there before me, your masks stripped away. You are men, I am only a woman; yet I look you in the eye. I am quite aware that there is nothing I could say that would change a word in the sentence you will soon pronounce. So then, just one last thing. Our only goal was the triumph of the principles of the Revolution; I swear that by our martyrs who fell on Satory

Plain. I honour them today, and someday they will be avenged.

"I am yours. Do as you please. Take my life. I am not the sort of woman who would spend even one minute disputing it with you." <sup>39</sup>

The audience was stunned by the contrast between Louise Michel and the poor trembling, terrified women who had stood there before her, or the men who had tried so hard to weasel an acquittal from their judges. One spectator remarked, "It takes very deep convictions to remain unmoved in the face of such charges, a character of steel not to cringe before the responsibility for such acts." <sup>40</sup>

The court then heard the explanations which Louise had already provided to Captain Briot in her interrogations, and the testimony of the witnesses. The concierge repeated her few snippets but Mme Josse, who probably had no wish to condemn Louise, conveniently lost her memory once again.

The public prosecutor then withdrew all the accusations, except the one about carrying weapons during an insurrectionary movement. Nonetheless, he said the accused posed a permanent danger to society and asked that the Council of War remove her from it. Given Louise's official wishes in the matter, Me Haussmann forfeited the right to enter a plea on her behalf, and threw her on the wisdom of the Council.

"Accused, have you anything to say in your defence?"

The superb actress rose, and once again played her role with eloquence and distinction. She spoke as the voice of the Revolution, but also as a woman in love who wanted to share the fate of the man she had loved so much.

"To you who call yourselves the Council of War, who permit yourselves to sit over me as my judges, who at least do not meet in secret like the Commission of Pardons for you are military men and deliver your judgments in public, to you, then, I make one request: Satory Plain. My brothers have already fallen there. You have been told you must remove me from society. Well then! The public prosecutor is right. Since it appears that any heart which beats for liberty has only one right, and that is to a bit of lead, I ask you for my share." She went on: "If you permit me to live, I shall never cease to cry for vengeance, I shall never cease to call on my brothers to wreak vengeance on the assassins of the Commission of Pardons."

The presiding judge was shocked. "I cannot allow you to

go on in that vein." And the tragic heroine made a reply worthy of Corneille or Hugo: "I have finished. Kill me — unless you are too cowardly to do so."<sup>41</sup>

Emotion swept the room. The Council of War refused Louise the death sentence she had sought and sentenced her instead to deportation to a fortress. As usual, she had twenty-four hours in which to submit an appeal. "No!" cried Louise, "No appeal. But I would have preferred death."

This tragedy, played to the hilt by a superb actress, had Paris buzzing. The newspaper *Le Voleur* compared Louise to Théroigne de Méricourt\* and began speculating about this Commune agitator who had been a "loved and esteemed" schoolteacher as well. What were people to make of it all? "Her imperturbable demeanour frustrated that spirit of observation which seeks to read the sentiments of the human heart."<sup>42</sup> *Le Figaro* snidely raised the issue of Mme Jules Simon, wife of the minister of Public Instruction: "Is it true that the charming schoolteacher who answers to the name of Louise Michel sat on those notorious commissions, chaired by Mme Jules Simon, which established materialist republican instruction for the schools? And is it true that the good wife of M. the minister of Public Instruction very seriously considered asking M. Thiers to pardon Louise Michel?"<sup>43</sup>

Victor Hugo wrote a long poem, *Viro Major*, which praised the tragic figure of Louise Michel:

*Ayant vu le massacre immense, le combat,  
Le peuple sur sa croix, Paris sur son grabat,  
La pitié formidable était dans tes paroles;  
Tu faisais ce que font les grandes âmes folles  
Et lasse de lutter, de rêver, de souffrir,  
Tu disais: «J'ai tué», car tu voulais mourir.  
Tu mentais contre toi, terrible et surhumaine.*

And, having invoked "the sombre Jewess" Judith, Aria la Romaine:

*Tu disais aux greniers: «J'ai brûlé les Palais.»  
Tu glorifiais ceux qu'on écrase et qu'on foule.*

\* Anne Joseph Théroigne de Méricourt (1762 - 1817): an "Amazon of liberty" and familiar of the revolutionary club of the Cordeliers, founded 1790, but loyal to the Girondists who were toppled in 1793 (by, among others, the members of the club of the Cordeliers). She was publicly whipped by a crowd of women after the fall of the Girondists and died insane, years later, in La Salpêtrière

— *transl. note*

*Tu criais: «J'ai tué. Qu'on me tue.» Et la foule  
Écoutait cette femme altière s'accuser...  
Tu semblais envoyer au sépulcre un baiser.  
Ton oeil fixe pesait sur les juges livides.  
Et tu songeais, pareille aux graves Euménides.  
La pâle mort était debout derrière toi...*

The hall was shocked for, said Hugo, "The people hate civil war."

*Dehors on entendait la rumeur de la ville.  
Cette femme écoutait la vie aux bruits confus,  
D'en haut, dans l'attitude austère de refus.*

She seemed to see one thing only:

*Qu'un pilori dressé pour une apothéose.*  
And then the judges, murmuring among themselves:  
*..Qu'elle meure. C'est juste.*

*Elle est infâme. — A moins qu'elle ne soit auguste,  
Disait leur conscience...*

And they hesitated, "looking at the stern and guilty one." And then, in his own way, Victor Hugo answers for her. After all, he had known this woman twenty years, ever since the far-off days in Vroncourt when she had sent him her childhood poems. He draws an attractive (and fair) picture of her:

*Et ceux qui, comme moi, te savent incapable  
De tout ce qui n'est pas héroïsme et vertu...  
Ceux qui savent tes vers mystérieux et doux,  
Tes jours, tes nuits, tes soins, tes pleurs donnés à tous,  
Ton oubli de toi-même à secourir les autres,  
Ta parole semblable aux flammes des apôtres.  
Ceux qui savent le toit sans feu, sans air, sans pain,  
Le lit de sangle avec la table de sapin,  
Ta bonté, ta fierté de femme populaire,  
L'âpre attendrissement qui dort sous ta colère...  
Ceux-là, femme, devant ta majesté farouche  
Méditaient...*

And, despite all the accusations that she had heaped on herself:  
*Voyaient resplendir l'ange à travers la méduse.*

And this was the cause of the uncertainty that she always left in her wake:

*Tu fus haute et semblas étrange en ces débats.  
Car, chétifs, comme sont les vivants d'ici-bas,  
Rien ne les trouble plus que deux âmes mêlées,  
Que le divin chaos des choses étoilées*

*Aperçu tout au fond d'un grand coeur inclément,  
Et qu'un rayonnement vu dans un flamboiement...*<sup>44</sup>

It's a penetrating analysis, practically a psychoanalysis. Louise really did have two natures in one and that was the essence of her undeniable human richness: nothing about her was simple, or routine, or mediocre. Her true dimensions are revealed only by this contradictory mixture of Revolution and charity.

Now she could look forward to her departure and so she tried to put her affairs in some semblance of order. In August, she gave Marianne full power of attorney so that she could claim the monies still owed by the municipality of Montmartre for classes taught in January and February and could also sell off the student-list from the school.<sup>45</sup> Louise wrote Marianne a comforting letter, full of the very real love that she felt toward the old woman (and yet for whom she would never sacrifice her higher ideals, since life is not an end in itself and cannot be simply doubled back upon those who gave it to you in the first place). "I beg you, do not torment yourself. Look after yourself so that, upon my return, I may see you again. I can bear everything else, but not that... Take heart and above all, take care, that I may see you again. I am not going far and I shall be all right." She promised that Abbé Folley would keep Marianne informed, should correspondence become difficult. "Courage. Think of those whose children are dead. I, after all, shall return."<sup>46</sup>

She felt that the other prisoners had forgotten about Ferré and talked too much about Rossel. Rossel really was of a different calibre than Ferré but Louise, the black-and-white revolutionary, was not the one to admit it. "People talk a great deal about Rossel," she wrote, "but before I leave this prison I wish to salute the graves of his two companions, who are forgotten today as they were ignored yesterday." First, Bourgeois, of whom she knew only that he was an orphan and that he had died bravely. "And second, Ferré, my brother in arms." She defended him, one last time. "I shall not speak of his behaviour during the Siege nor as a member of the Commune. I shall not name the officers whose lives he saved on March 18; that time will come. I wish, instead, to give him this message: we are proud of you, and we envy your fate, for you died for the cause of the people."<sup>47</sup> Yes, some students held a demonstration to protest Rossel's execution, but Ferré, "the

delegate from the popular districts, who repeatedly but anonymously risked his own life, who was correct and calm in everything that he did, who gave his full intelligence and heart to the cause, no, nobody honoured his memory... Such behaviour can mean only that Paris is truly dead." She solemnly charged the Commune sympathizers who had managed to take refuge abroad never to forget "the hangmen of the Commission of Pardons."<sup>48</sup>

And finally, she gave Abbé Folley copies of all the letters she had written since her arrest — the one exonerating the working-class women from any involvement with the Commune, the one about the women's brigade, the ones about the famous "documents" incriminating M. Thiers which she now regretted not having mentioned during her trial — and asked that he forward the entire bundle to lawyers Marchand and Laviolette, who would make appropriate use of them. Perhaps some newspaper would manage to publish them without running undue risk? "I think I am now quite without a heart, yet I must carry out my duties according to my conscience. Now they can do with me as they will; I'll not feel it..."<sup>49</sup>

She had set her teeth and done everything she felt must be done, but now she was in the grips of her misery, tottering on the edge of absolute despair. "He [Ferré] was right to urge me to hold on to my courage. Now, for the first time, I truly feel that I am no longer worthy either of the cause, or of him. To hear seven o'clock strike every morning, to hear two o'clock strike in the dead of each night, to think that they awakened him, with his great intelligence and courage, only to assassinate him...no, it's unbearable. Please do not think me a coward, it's not that. But to live like this is a torture to which I would have already succumbed but for the duty which orders me not to yield."<sup>50</sup>

Then one night, they brusquely led Louise and twenty other women to a waiting police van. Destination: Auberive prison.

## VIII - THE GREAT VOYAGE

Height, 1.64 metres; brown hair and eyebrows; high forehead; brown eyes; large nose; average mouth; round chin; oval face; regular complexion — these were the identifying characteristics of convict No. 2182, Louise Michel.<sup>1</sup>

Louise was always to remember the former chateau of Auberive, now transformed into a prison, with a sort of surprised delight. I've already said that she had the sensitivity, the raw material and the sheer energy to be a great writer. What she lacked was taste. She wrote as she lived, always a hurried first draft (she said). Even so, there were sometimes flashes of something better: "I can see Auberive now, with its narrow paths winding through the fir trees, the winds sighing through its large dormitories as if through a great ship, the silent files of prisoners with their white caps and pleated kerchiefs caught at their throats, like peasant women of a hundred years ago..."<sup>2</sup> And the winds of Auberive were the same ones she had felt in the halls of Vroncourt those many years ago.<sup>3</sup>

After the high drama of the Commune and the tragedy of the councils of war, everything else paled in comparison, seemed "trivial, without significance... I'm not suffering. I'm dead, and that's for the best. Only one sorrow touches me [the defeat of the Commune? more probably Ferré's death]. It is as if I have passed beyond life itself." A phrase from the Mass echoed in her mind: *sursum corda*. "It must surprise you to hear me quote the Mass," she wrote Abbé Folley, "but right



now, these are the appropriate words." She entrusted Marianne to his care: "Tell her that she is more fortunate than many other mothers. Use whatever words you can find." And then, a bit impishly, "She's so good at resigning herself..."<sup>4</sup>

Louise could reveal to Abbé Folley all her inner melancholy and despair, the real self so different from the fierce, implacable *pétroleuse* of public image. For her real self was an unhappy woman who had lost the man she loved and admired (since, with Louise, love and admiration could not be separated). The only thing left to her — she, who bowed to nobody — was to remain worthy of him and obey his last wishes. "No... I shall not betray this trust. But if you knew, at this new year,\* how much I live in the past and in the future rather than the present... You know who ordered me to be calm; I obey."<sup>5</sup> Louise reacted to Abbé Folley's reply as if it had come from Ferré himself: "Yes, I shall obey. I saw in him such superiority of mind and heart that to me, his advice amounted to orders — and I have never obeyed anybody in my entire life."<sup>6</sup> She could have accepted anything, anything but the execution of November 28! If only she could have died like and with Ferré, joined him in martyrdom for the one cause worthy of such sacrifice: the Revolution. "It is a joy to die for one's convictions, as long as we die together. Otherwise, it is pointless cruelty."<sup>7</sup> She thought of the past. One year earlier, she had told Ferré that it was noble to have no reward for one's actions but death. "But that was when I hoped to share it with him. It would have made me so happy..."<sup>8</sup>

To obey, therefore, to be calm, to wait patiently. Wait for what? For the great sea voyage she had hoped to make with him. Fortunately, there were always the pinpricks of prison life to distract her... The cells, for example, where she was sent when she refused to join some mandatory group activity or other. From there, you could look out over the countryside.<sup>9</sup> No news from the outside world, except for visits from the town crier who came to read new governmental orders, proving each time that "Nothing changes in the worst of all possible Republics."<sup>10</sup>

Her other distraction, a happier one, was to help the other prisoners. "The awareness of all that remains still to be done is the only thing that keeps me from trying to join those whom I

\* written in January 1872 — *transl. note*

have lost.”<sup>11</sup>

The Auberive detainees included Augustine Chiffon, called “Madame la Capitaine,” who had received a sentence of twenty years’ forced labour for defending the Austerlitz barricade, revolver in hand; Béatrix Excoffon, ambulance nurse and president of the Boule Noire revolutionary club, sentenced to deportation to a fortress; Mme Poirier, president of the women’s Vigilance Committee of the eighteenth arrondissement, also sentenced to deportation; Mme Delettra, an “old woman” of fifty, who had earned her nickname, “Queen of the Barricades,” back in 1848 in Lyon, sentenced to twenty years; Nathalie Lemel, as courageous and intelligent as Louise herself, who had run the Union of Women for the Defence of Paris, sentenced to deportation to a fortress; and the women who had been collectively sentenced to death at the so-called Trial of the *Pétroleuses*, their sentences later commuted to life imprisonment at hard labour — Elizabeth Rétoffe, Joséphine Marchais, Léontine Suétens.<sup>12</sup> And many, many more. Yes, Louise could at least try to help these women. She therefore wrote Victor Hugo, whose generosity and courage had never failed her: “Dear Master, could you win the release of Béatrix [Excoffon]?” The woman had lost first her father, then her mother (from sorrow) and now her brother-in-law had just died.<sup>13</sup> Louise, together with Abbé Folley, became an intermediary for the other prisoners: three women asked her to take the necessary steps to bring them before the Commission of Pardons.<sup>14</sup> She kept Abbé Folley informed as to the health and morale of the others:<sup>15</sup> Rétoffe and Marchais were full of courage, Suétens and Papavoine were ill. Worse than that: “These poor women are becoming so demoralized that they’re beginning to say the most ridiculous things.” Fortunately, Auberive enjoyed a “good” prison administration, which understood that these women’s past sufferings had been quite enough to account for any present mental instability. “Give them hope,” Louise told the chaplain.

Nonetheless, the prisoners slowly adjusted to their situation, began to work and said they wanted to study. As always, Louise responded to the appeal. “Boredom and trivial thoughts are disappearing.”<sup>16</sup> But how frivolous and gossipy they all were! They even talked about military executions right to Louise’s face, thereby, she said, proving the truth of the old expression about “turning a knife in the wound.”<sup>17</sup>

Louise was mindful of the "good sisters" of the Versailles prison and sent them, through Abbé Folley, a spray of holly as a souvenir. "The Gospel today was the story of all martyrdoms: first the entry into Jerusalem, and then Calvary. Only those who die are happy."<sup>18</sup>

Paris was full of rumours about Louise's fate, including one which said that she was being held incommunicado, so that some discreet poison might bring about the fate to which they had not dared openly sentence her.<sup>19</sup> Three women called on Victor Hugo, asking him to try to have her sentence commuted to one of simple banishment. He wrote in his *Carnets*,<sup>20</sup> "I shall do what I can," but Louise countermanded these efforts: "I want nothing in my sentence altered. I have the right to demand that it be left unchanged." Her only wish was to see her mother still alive upon her return; her only duty, "to remain worthy of those who died, and of our objective. The future will be our judge."<sup>21</sup> She learned that Captain Briot himself, in a spirit of "irresponsible benevolence," had made approaches on her behalf to the Commission of Pardons. She was appalled. Abbé Folley must convince this over-zealous, guilt-stricken captain that she would rather die than be "degraded."<sup>22</sup> Would all these friends, trying so hard to intercede on her behalf, please leave her in peace! All she wanted was the calm oblivion of prison: "even semi-liberty would disturb me."<sup>23</sup>

And under all these surface events ran the steady current of her despair, breaking out from time to time in the cry: "I shrink from daylight, from summer, from all that is alive."<sup>24</sup>

As usual, Louise's great sprawling handwriting blackened many sheets of paper with new poetry. One lovely example was the poem she wrote on November 28, 1872, in commemoration of Ferré's death. (It is, perhaps, more accurate to say that the poem contained a few lovely lines.) Here Louise is at her best, her tenderness openly revealed:

*Soufflez, O vents d'hiver, tombe toujours, O neige,  
On est plus près des morts sous tes linceuls glacés.  
Qu la nuit soit sans fin et que le jour s'abrège,  
On compte par hiver chez les froids trépassés...*

But then she dries her eyes and looks bravely (if somewhat tritely) to the future and to eternal renewal:

*Pareil au grain qui devient gerbe  
Sur le sol arrosé de sang*

*L'avenir grandira superbe*  
*Sous le rouge soleil levant...*<sup>25</sup>

Publishers besieged her, clamouring with equal degrees of excitement for new material or works to reissue. Louise had previously published nothing more than some poetry, some articles and the preface to her *Plus d'idiots, plus de fous*. Her manuscripts were widely scattered. And she was well aware that on the pretext of helping Marianne, they intended to hold "an orgy of maudlin sentimentality" at her expense. She refused to co-operate with any such "contemptible" plan.<sup>26</sup> "They think I'll tamely write them some pretty little tales that preach a high moral lesson at the end." She'd never do that but, if it would earn some money for her mother, she'd gladly write some history and geography textbooks.<sup>27</sup> She had begun work in April<sup>28</sup> on a collection of children's stories, *La Livre du jour de l'an*, a good vehicle for all her favourite themes: Brittany, whose primitive inhabitants were still men of faith; human suffering throughout the ages; legends, which she cross-referenced from one country to another (an Iroquois tale brought to mind a German one); the need for goodness (e.g. *Les Dix Sous de Marthe*, *L'Héritage du Grand-père Blaise*); and the other side of the coin as well, ogres, both male (Gilles de Retz and the Baron des Adrets) and female (Béatrix de Mauléon).

She received a visit from her mother and some of her cousins. This gave her renewed will to work, since "It seems this could be of some help to *maman*." Still, she was dubious: "I don't want to give idiot friends any fresh stimulus to rush off begging favours on my behalf. Anyway, you can keep a watchful eye on it all," she wrote Abbé Folley.<sup>29</sup>

*Le Rappel* announced the publication of the convict's stories.<sup>30</sup> *La République française* gave "this book of goodness and justice" a highly favourable review: "Even under lock and key, Louise Michel is the eternal schoolteacher. She wishes to teach children to be responsible adults, and the gaiety, sanity and joy of her approach is unchanged. She says, 'Children, you are the future. Be just. That is everything.'"<sup>31</sup>

Victor de Thiery, however, wrote a furiously indignant review for *Le Pays*. "This creature deserves neither attention nor pity. Oh, the poor little communards of the future! As for the anonymous author of that soppy review in *La République française*, it's a safe bet that if he had any children, he'd keep Louise Michel's books safely out of reach."<sup>32</sup> It's obvious that

Victor de Thierry hadn't read the thoroughly moralistic tales in question — though one must add, Louise's code of justice and morality did proceed from a critique of society not usually to be found in children's books. *Pauvre Blaise*, for example, was a tale designed to stir the first flickerings of social revolt...

Meanwhile, prison life followed its same monotonous rhythm. Louise kept writing: *La Femme à travers les âges* (later published in a newspaper), *L'Excommunié*, *La Conscience*, *Le Livre des morts*, the first part of *Livre du Bagne*.<sup>33</sup> All these efforts have disappeared without a trace, but what remains is more than enough. There's far too much bad writing in print as it is!

Louise was as belligerent as ever, even after two years in prison. She did write to the Commission of Pardons, but only to threaten them: "Bravo, gentlemen executors of noble deeds, your role is a vital one. Once you have finished your work, no shred of doubt will remain as to any possible wisdom and morality in your party. The Empire left a small margin of infamy as yet uncommitted, but you commit it now. You have made France the shame of the entire world; socialism will rise from these ruins to save her."<sup>34</sup>

She complained as well to M. Massé, police superintendent, about the police spies and *agents provocateurs* who were passing themselves off to her as journalists.<sup>35</sup>

For they had to keep a close watch on Louise, even in prison. Her conduct before the Council of War, after all, had made her a symbol of revolutionary resistance. A pamphlet printed in La Chaux-de-Fonds began to circulate, entitled, *Un Mot sur les tribunaux politiques, condamnation de Louise Michel*. The ministry of the Interior was sufficiently worried to order all departmental prefects to suppress it immediately.<sup>36</sup>

Months passed. Occasionally Marianne would make the long, expensive trip from Clefmont (where she was living with her sister) to visit her daughter. She wrote Louise touching, naive and baffled letters. It wasn't easy to be Louise Michel's mother: "The pain I have known has broken me." She talked of the life they might have led together and the joy it would have given her: "I feel such misery when I think that we could have lived together and been happy while you taught your classes. Yet here we are instead, separated from each other." She sent Louise a branch from the tree above her grandfather's grave and a flower from that of her grandmother.<sup>37</sup> The old woman

complained. Her kidneys bothered her. She was unable to work the bit of land still remaining to her: "The vineyards depress me, so I don't visit them anymore."<sup>38</sup> She would have liked to send Louise a bit of money with which to buy herself strong coffee (Louise's great addiction), but she had none. "You were so touchy when I mentioned the coffee. I'm not reproaching you but the fact is, I have no money, and it bothers me."

She sent Louise a bowl which had belonged to an aunt. And the underlying reproaches bore the mark of peasant respectability: "I never dreamed I'd see the insides of a reformatory, especially on your behalf."<sup>39</sup> Still, whenever she had a little money, Marianne sent some of it to Louise: four francs one time, two francs another, nine francs...

Louise in return sent her the bits of needlecraft she was doing in prison: a pincushion for her aunt, a collar for her mother.<sup>40</sup> She fussed about winter clothing and Marianne replied: "Don't worry about what I'm going to wear this winter. I don't need your coat. Keep it."<sup>41</sup> The old lady visited Vroncourt, searched everywhere for a souvenir flower from the former gardens but found none, not even in the kitchen garden: "They've ploughed everything under."<sup>42</sup>

Marianne's greatest sorrow was Louise's lack of faith, for she had no understanding whatsoever of her daughter's personal evolution. "Put your trust in God... Only God can protect you... Don't forget to let me know when you're about to set out on your trip. Your aunt and I will put you under the protection of the Blessed Virgin and Saint Joseph."<sup>43</sup> She sent Louise a lock of her hair, now turned pure white, and the implicit reproach was clear: "It's not the years I have spent on this earth that have done this, it's the torment I have known in these last three years on your behalf."<sup>44</sup>

Just as François Villon's mother had done before her, this "humble Christian" tried ceaselessly to bring Louise to docility and faith. "You are forever asking what would give me pleasure. Only one thing would give me great pleasure, and that would be to see you a little more submissive... When you were a child, you haunted the church, now you don't even attend Mass... Yet now you have the time, and it would please me so much."<sup>45</sup>

Louise heard from other members of her family as well, including her devoted cousin, Marie Laurent, who wrote: "I shall tear aside the veil of mourning that shrouds my heart to

love you as no-one has ever loved before." She called Louise her "beloved cousin," her "dear sister."<sup>46</sup> Even within her own family, Louise aroused respect and fervent love.

By now the departure for New Caledonia seemed imminent. Marianne, despite the fatigue which the trip to Auberive always caused her, announced that she wished to come once more: "I'm so afraid that if I wait, it will be like Versailles and I'll not see you at all." Aunt Victoire embraced her (by mail). Cousin Marie Laurent sent some more emotion-charged pages.<sup>47</sup> Marianne fretted: "Above all, I beg you to take care of yourself during this trip, so that we may meet again. For my part, I'm no longer young and I have seen many years go by, the latest ones being especially sorrowful for me..."<sup>48</sup>

Despite their quarrels, Louise really did love her mother very much and therefore arranged with the ever-patient Abbé Folley to tell Marianne as many reassuring white lies as circumstances seemed to require: during the sea trip, for example, he was to give her mother continuing progress reports, just as if he really were in touch with Louise.<sup>49</sup>

Deep down, Louise was thrilled with the idea of this trip. It would be risky, but she loved adventure, and it was sure to be rich in experience. She prepared for it just as if the whole thing had been her own idea, rather than imposed upon her. She contacted the Geographic Society and arranged to send back her observations on the climate and products of this still little-known region.<sup>50</sup> The chairman of the Acclimatization Society furnished her with seeds which she thought might be useful in the colony. He also supplied her requested list of books, and the titles demonstrate the breadth of her linguistic curiosity, for they ranged from a grammar and a dictionary of the Breton language, to a variety of Russian and Polish textbooks.<sup>51</sup> I doubt very many other deportees ever set off as did Louise Michel, determined to transform punishment into a scientific expedition.

Just before her departure, Louise bestowed one last vengeful farewell on that "old world" she was leaving behind. They had insisted she continue to live, so be it:

*Vous me verrez de rive en rive*

*Jeter le cri de Liberté...*

She and her fellows would forget nothing:

*Nous sommes les grands justiciers,*

*Nous sommes les spectres funèbres...*

*Nous sommes la horde innombrable...*

Some day, the Revolution would blow "like the wind through the fields." And then the judges, the high and mighty, the victors,

*Vous irez où s'en va l'écume,  
Où va la fange du ruisseau,  
Où s'en va la lave qui fume...<sup>52</sup>*

The corridors of power were now alive with their own preparations for the great departure. The Superior-General of the Congregation of Saint Joseph of Cluny put two nuns at the disposal of the minister of the Navy and the Colonies, who were to accompany the deportees to New Caledonia.<sup>53</sup>

The prisoners were allowed one final family visit on the eve of their departure. Louise saw that her mother's hair was indeed pure white.<sup>54</sup> Marianne still had two brothers and two sisters alive, and the sister in Lagny was financially able to take her in. Louise was very much reassured: "I have no cause for complaint." Many others were not so fortunate.<sup>55</sup>

The women left the prison by carriage between six and seven o'clock the following morning. Their first stop was Langres, where they were transferred to police vans. Some grimy-armed workers, probably blacksmiths, came out of their shops to greet the women. One grizzled old man shouted something, perhaps "Long live the Commune!" but his words were lost in the galloping hooves of the departing horses. That night, as they slept in their vans, they crossed Paris, from Gare de l'Est to Gare d'Austerlitz.<sup>56</sup>

The second stop was a way-house in La Rochelle. The authorities' paperwork for the voyage included a list of the prisoners' occupations. There they were, all lined up: journalist Marie Cailleux, seamstress Adèle Desfossés, bookbinder Nathalie Lemel, wardrobe-mistress Marie Pervillé, Marie Leroy (of no profession)... This list of washerwomen, seamstresses, wardrobe-mistresses, a teacher, a bookbinder, even a "registered prostitute," formed an accurate social profile of the women of the Commune. The authorities also took note of their personal finances: 90 francs, 112 francs, 130 francs... Louise Michel, with 2 fr. 50 in her pocket, was the poorest of them all.<sup>57</sup>

On August 28, 1873, *La Comète* carried them from La Rochelle to Rochefort:

*On lève l'ancre, France, adieu.*



wrote Louise in a state of high emotion, at three that morning.

All that day, little boats accompanied the ship, *La Virginie*, and its cargo of deportees, offering them one last salute. The women waved their handkerchiefs in reply. When hers blew away in the wind, Louise waved her widow's veil instead.<sup>59</sup>

This was the beginning of the great voyage which she had so long anticipated, which even her verses from Audeloncourt days had somehow foreseen. She *recognized* the ship: "I have spoken...of the kinds of circumstances which set tellers of strange tales, like Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire, to dreaming. I shall say little on my own account: perhaps this brief mention of *La Virginie* in full sail, just as I had already seen her in my dreams, will be the only page I write of this sort."<sup>60</sup> And indeed, Louise never again mentioned the kinds of presentiments she had experienced that night in the Montmartre cemetery and later described to Ferré. She may have been an anarchist revolutionary, a materialist and an atheist, but even so, she had a kind of communication with the invisible worthy of the prophets of any religion.

*La Virginie* was an old sailing frigate, built in 1848. She had been hauled out of mothballs expressly for this trip, and the authorities had had the greatest of difficulty in finding any captain willing to command her. The ship contained two huge cages, one each for the male and female deportees.<sup>61</sup> Communication was officially forbidden between the cages, but the rule was freely ignored.

"Good morning, comrade," called Louise Michel one morning to Rochefort. "Good morning, comrade," he replied. She pulled a calico dress and bonnet from her bag and said, "Look what lovely wedding presents Mac-Mahon<sup>\*62</sup> has sent me." That was the start of a thirty-year friendship.

Whatever the special circumstances of this voyage, Louise — who had never even been to the seashore — was wildly enthusiastic about it all. She drank in every detail: "We could still see the coast of France for five or six days and then, nothing. On about the fourteenth day, most of the huge ocean birds disappeared, though two continued to follow us for a while

\* Marshal M.-E.-P.-M. Mac-Mahon, Duc de Magenta: commander of the Versailles troops that crushed the Commune and, by the time Louise set sail for New Caledonia, president of the Republic — *transl. note*

longer..."<sup>63</sup> Then swallows reappeared on their masts: they were nearing the Canary Islands. The very thought enchanted her. "Far in the distance, a peak floating in the clouds. Is it Mount Caldera or just another formation of the clouds themselves?" She noted the grace and beauty of the Canary Islanders who came out to the ship bearing fruit. Her imagination took flight (as usual): perhaps these were the descendants of long-lost Atlantis? She wrote, like some latter-day Chateaubriand: "I have often thought of the continents which lie buried beneath the oceans. Should they rise from their beds, they would engulf us, thus deserting one tomb only to create another." *This* Chateaubriand, however, had faith in the future: "But it wouldn't stop eternal progress," she quickly added.<sup>64</sup>

The high seas were a constant delight to this woman who had previously known only the Haute-Marne, Paris and a succession of prisons. "All my life I had dreamed of sailing the broad oceans and now there I was, balanced between the skies and the seas as between two deserts, with nothing to break the silence but wind and rolling waves."<sup>65</sup> They put in at Santa Catarina in Brazil, its fortress and mountain peaks lost in clouds. And then they crossed the South Atlantic Ocean, where "snow falls on the bridge in the dead of night."

Her passion for the sky and the sea appeared in her poetry:

*La neige tombe, le flot roule,  
L'air est glacé, le ciel est noir,  
Le vaisseau craque sous la houle  
Et le matin se mêle au soir...*

The sailors, who were Breton, danced about on the decks to keep warm:

*Ils disent au pôle glacé  
Un air des landes de Bretagne,  
Un vieux bardit du temps passé,*

and their song brought tears to the eye:

*Cet air est-il un chant magique?...  
Non, c'est un souffle d'Armorique  
Tout rempli de genêts en fleur...*

But Louise's thoughts always turned from the past to the future:

*Et c'est le vent des mers polaires,  
Tonnant dans ses trompes d'airain  
Les nouveaux bardits populaires*

*De la légende de demain.*<sup>66</sup>

Whenever the wind howled at tempest force, whenever the waves towered and crashed, whenever *La Virginie* tossed and strained... Louise set loose her emotions to join the storm:

*L'aspect de ces gouffres enivre,  
Plus haut, O flots, plus fort, O vents.  
Il devient trop cher de vivre  
Tant ici les songes sont grands.*

What she wanted to do was disappear, lose herself "in the crucible of the elements." She urged the storm to redouble its fury:

*Enflez les voiles, O tempêtes,  
Plus haut, O flots, plus fort, O vents  
Navire, en avant, en avant...*<sup>67</sup>

She passed these poems to Rochefort who — "a sad Paul for this Virginia" as he wryly put it — was tormented by seasickness: "I don't know why Vasco da Gama ever struggled to find this miserable route." The poem he in turn addressed to his "lady neighbour of the rear starboard side" was in quite a different tone. Thank you very much, he could do without the sea and the wind. Then his talent for biting satire came to the fore:

*Avant d'entrer au gouffre amer,  
Avions-nous moins le mal de mer?*

When they met icebergs:

*Je songe alors à nos vainqueurs,  
Quand nous nous heurtions à des coeurs  
Cent fois plus durs que des banquises.*

And:

*Ce phoque entrevu ce matin  
M'a rappelé dans le lointain,  
Le chauve Rouher aux mains grasses,  
Et ces requins qu'on a pêchés  
De la Commission des Grâces.*

And as for the law, "Misery to the vanquished":

*N'en étions-nous pas convaincus  
Avant d'aller aux antipodes...*<sup>68</sup>

And so the two prisoners amused each other.

Even in this extreme poverty, Louise still managed to give things away. Her "lovely wedding present" from Mac-Mahon had gone immediately. She walked the bridge in temperatures of 5 degrees Celsius with nothing on her feet but a pair of canvas

espadrilles. Captain Launay, who was a decent man, wanted to give her a pair of shoes. Knowing that Louise would never take them from him, he asked Rochefort to pass them on: "You must make her think they come from you." Rochefort sent Louise a little note, explaining that his daughter had given him these shoes just before they set sail but, alas, they were too small for him. "For two days, I had the pleasure of seeing them on her feet. By the third day, they were on someone else's feet. In this world, possessing nothing is no sure defence against exploitation," he concluded with his habitual illusion-free irony.<sup>69</sup>

Louise's charity extended to animals, as it always had. The "cruellest thing" she saw on *La Virginie* was not the deportees in their cages but rather, the massacre of the albatross. The birds were caught on fish-hooks and then suspended by their feet "so that they would die without soiling their white feathers. For the longest, most pitiful time, they would keep lifting their heads, stretching their swan-like necks as far as possible, prolonging the terrible agony which we could read in the horror that filled their black-lashed eyes."<sup>70</sup> Louise, quite ignoring the fact that she, too, was a prisoner, did everything she could to halt this cruel practice.

She also used the lengthy voyage to think about the events of the Commune and the reasons for its defeat. She talked it all over with Nathalie Lemel, Nathalie being the only woman of the group who could be considered Louise's equal. "A remarkable intelligence, a clear and wise spirit," wrote Henry Bauer in his *Mémoires d'un jeune homme*.<sup>71</sup> Rochefort concurred: "One of the loveliest and most intelligent women I have ever known. Her eloquence and good sense merit great praise."<sup>72</sup>

Nathalie Lemel, née Duval, was only three years older than Louise but appeared older still and "wearied by life."<sup>73</sup> Born on August 26, 1827 in Brest, the daughter of wealthy cafe proprietors, she had received a good education for the times and then married a bookbinder. For a while they ran a bookstore in Quimper and, when it went bankrupt, moved on to Paris, where they soon separated. Nathalie, though intelligent, was "highly exalted" — that adjective being used regularly by the police and the magistracy for people who held and lived by strong political convictions. Nathalie was forever calling attention to herself in the various bookbinding shops where she worked