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The Defender of the Barricade

A Story of the Paris Commune
By WILLARD BLAKEMAN

The human race lives on the edge of the chasm of war. All modern wars, civilized people having now reached a stage where war is dreaded, may be referred to as stupidity. One of the most stupid contests within the last half century was the uprising of the Paris commune at the close of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871. If ever a country needed peace in which to recover from its wounds France did at that time. And yet a number of impracticable idealists, led by villains, for a time paralyzed the government by fire and sword. And when they had succeeded in acquiring the power to carry out their ideas their whole structure fell to the ground because these ideas were utopian.

The singular feature of all this is the sincerity and devotion to a cause under which there was no foundation. That the leaders were unscrupulous, as well as idealists, goes without saying. But many of the revolutionists undoubtedly fought and died, actuated by pure motives.

During the period when the communists held Paris by means of barricades erected upon the streets through which the national troops were attacking them, Captain Pierre Le Moyne was ordered to take his company into a narrow street and demolish a barricade, behind which a party of communists were entrenched. There was but little room in which an attacking force could operate, the street being not over thirty feet wide. Captain Le Moyne was obliged to march his men down the narrow lane, the houses of which rose on either side to a height greater than the width of the street. The distance from the beginning of the street to the barricade was about 1,000 feet. From the windows and the roofs of the houses it was to be expected that the advancing troops would be picked off by the communists.

Many a soldier, when he received the order to march into the death trap or heard the reverberation between the houses of the first tap of the drum which announced it, felt that there was little chance of his ever getting out alive. Each stroke on the drum-head sounded sharp and loud and ominous. As the little column moved onward there was a crack from a window, a faint cloud of smoke, and one of the men fell on the pavement. Another crack from a roof on the opposite side of the street, and another man plunged forward on his face.

"At this rate," thought Captain Le Moyne, "by the time we reach the barricade there will be not enough of us left to take it."

"Tap-tap! Tap-tap-tap!" came the drumbeats, while at short intervals a crack of a weapon here and there added to their viciousness.

But as the men advanced the shots came fewer. When one-half the distance had been covered, where there had been a dozen shots a minute there was now only a straggling fire, and the marksmanship was wild.

"Either they are breaking down," said the captain, "or they have concentrated all their force at the barricade." On marched the troops, reduced by a fifth of their number, till, turning a bend in the street, they came in sight of the barricade. The firing from the windows ceased entirely. The silence, broken only by the sharply reverberating drum taps, was more ominous than if the drums had been deadened by a fusillade. The pile of cobblestones which floated the blood red flag of the commune looked ugly—more ugly because the weapons behind it, aimed down the narrow street, were invisible.

Captain Le Moyne halted his men for the purpose of taking in the situation. He cast quick glances at the upper stories and roofs of the houses on each side. No one was in sight, nor was a single shot fired.

"They are reserving their fire," said the captain. "We shall get it from the windows when we charge the works." He strained his eyes in an endeavor to get sight of something stirring within. Not even the flag moved, for there was no wind.

Silence before the storm is more depressing than after it breaks. Men standing waiting for a fight to open are more unreliable than in the heat of battle. Le Moyne's soldiers seemed restless. There was no reason for them to move till they received an order to advance, yet they changed position constantly, casting the while glances at the houses above them and the barricade.

Though they expected a hailstorm of bullets, when the order "Forward" was given they felt relieved. Suspense at

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least was ended. Again came the sharp tap of the drum as the little column moved on without opposition. Evidently the communists were reserving their fire till the last minute. When within a hundred yards of the barricade Captain Le Moyne halted his men again and called on the enemy to surrender. His demand was answered by a single shot.

Expecting this to be a signal for a volley, the captain quickly deployed his men so far as the narrow street would permit and gave the order to fire. A volley of bullets rained upon the stones composing the barricade. There was no response.

Le Moyne was puzzled. Drawing up his men in two lines, the one behind the other, he ordered them to fix bayonets and advance. A third of the distance was covered, but no volley; another third, with the same result. Captain Le Moyne, who was in advance of his men, went to the barricade, climbed it and looked down on the other side.

There was but one living being there, and that was a woman. She had been wounded by a shot from the troops and lay bleeding on the pavement.

Most of the women who fought with the commune were hags. This woman was not more than twenty years old. She looked up at Le Moyne with a pair of large dark eyes. They expressed a spirit of martyrdom.

It was all plain to Le Moyne. The commune was breaking down. The barricade had been deserted except by this Maid of Orleans, who constituted herself its sole defender.

Le Moyne turned, called on a lieutenant to bring the men to a rest, then went down the barricade to the woman.

"Are you badly wounded?" he asked. "No; I have a broken leg."

"Who are you?" "Elise Fourchet."

"What are you doing here alone behind this barricade?" "I could not get the men to stay. They heard that our defenses were broken down in other parts, and they dared not remain."

"And you?" "I would not desert."

By this time the soldiers had climbed the barricade and were waving the tricolor of France from its crest. Le Moyne called upon them to carry its defender into a house beside it, going with them as they did so. There was only one person besides the captain and his men, an old woman, who ministered to the wounded girl. A surgeon accompanied the soldiers, and he was called in to set and bandage the broken limb.

Had the damage done by the commune ended with its loss of control perhaps the wholesale slaughter of its votaries which followed would not have taken place. When its leaders found that they were beaten, adopting the motto of rule or ruin, since they could not rule they resolved to ruin. They murdered the archbishop of Paris and other distinguished persons whom they held as hostages. Not content with this, they undertook to destroy the city. Paris was then full of beautiful buildings. Many of these were destroyed, including the most interesting, historically considered, the palace of the Tuilleries, the ancient abode of the kings of France.

It was these acts of vandalism that led the government to get rid, so far as possible, of so dangerous a portion of the population of Paris. The captured communists were marched out to the yards of the prisons in which they were confined, stood up with their faces to the walls and shot down by scores. Doubtless many of these believed that they were dying in a sacred cause.

Captain Le Moyne could he have foreseen these horrors would undoubtedly have continued to save his prisoner from the universal sacrifice, though he had but little time, and Elise Fourchet was not in a condition to avail herself of a permitted flight. The only thing the captain could do for her was to leave her with the woman who was caring for her. He marched his men away, but the national troops were pouring into the city, and when Mlle. Fourchet was found wounded and confessed that she had received a bullet while defending a barricade she was removed to a prison.

If the communists received a trial they were tried in large numbers together. When Elise Fourchet was brought before a judge for one of these wholesale sentences, noticing she was of a different class from most of the others, he asked her why she had engaged in such nefarious work.

"I fought to build, not to destroy," was her reply. "I did not know that we were led by bad men. One of our leaders, Chusseret, fought with the

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Union armies in the late war between the states of North America, and I supposed that a man who had risked his life in the cause of civil liberty must be representing the same cause in France.

The judge was touched by this appeal and remanded the prisoner to prison for further evidence. But the Parisians soon tired of the wholesale slaughter of the communists, and Mlle. Fourchet was never again brought to trial. In time, when all danger of a recurrence of the outbreak had passed, the prison doors of all communists who had not been executed were thrown open, and among those who walked out free was Elise Fourchet.

She ever afterward had a horror of the men who had led so many innocent persons into crime. Not all of them were punished unless by their own consciences. A few escaped, others perished in the havoc they had made, while others were banished from France. Probably no body of men ever set in motion a revolution that involved so much ruin, not only of historic treasures, but of persons they deceived. As Paris is France, their chief devastation was in that city. Just before its capture bands of men and women—such men and women as followed Louis XVI. to the guillotine seventy years before—went from one historic edifice to another, applying petroleum and to petroleum the torch. When the ruin was completed Paris was a very different city from what it had been before. How that art treasure, the Louvre, escaped will always remain a wonder. While Elise Fourchet was long remembered as one of the heroines of the commune, she never afterward affiliated with communists. And as for the commune leaders, she detested them.

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